

Is Japan Developing a Nuclear Weapons Program?

Huge reprocessing plant could be used to stockpile plutonium for the future manufacture of nuclear weapons.

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The *Wall Street Journal* published an article on May 1 entitled “Japan’s nuclear plan unsettles US.” It indicated concerns in Washington that the opening of a huge reprocessing plant could be used to stockpile plutonium for the future manufacture of nuclear weapons.

The Rokkasho reprocessing facility in northern Honshu can produce nine tonnes of weapons-grade plutonium annually, or enough to construct up to 2,000 bombs. While Japanese officials insist that the plutonium will be used solely to provide nuclear power, only two of the country’s 50 nuclear power reactors are currently operating.

The *Journal* article reported that Tatsujiro Suzuki, vice chairman of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission, discussed the issue last month with senior US officials, including Deputy Energy Secretary Daniel Poneman and Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Countryman.

Their message, as paraphrased by Suzuki, was: “Allowing Japan to acquire large amounts of plutonium without clear prospects for a plutonium-use plan is a bad example for the rest of the world.” In a separate article in the *Japan Times*, Suzuki declared: “It was an unprecedentedly severe reaction.”

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Washington was concerned that other countries would follow suit. “US officials believe Japan’s neighbors, particularly China, South Korea and Taiwan, are closely monitoring Rokkasho and its possible commissioning to gauge whether they also should seek to develop their own nuclear-fuel technologies, or in Beijing’s case, expand them,” it stated.

The South Korean government is already pressing the US to alter the nuclear co-operation agreement between the two countries to allow plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment—technologies that can be used to produce fuel for power reactors or for nuclear weapons. While South Korean negotiators have assured Washington that Seoul is only seeking to manufacture fuel for its power reactors, senior figures inside the ruling right-wing Saenuri Party have publicly called for the country to build its own nuclear weapons to counter North Korea. Last month, South Korea acquiesced to US demands for a delay and prolonged the existing co-operation agreement for another two years.

As with South Korea, the Obama administration’s real concern over the Rokkasho reprocessing plant is that Japan is edging toward building its own nuclear arsenal. If either country did so, it would trigger a nuclear arms race in the region. A nuclear-armed Japan would dramatically alter relations in Asia, as it would be less dependent on the US militarily and more able to independently prosecute its economic and strategic interests.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who took office in December, is a right-wing nationalist who has called for a “strong Japan” and a “strong military.” He has not openly supported the building of nuclear weapons, but has called for the restarting of Japan’s nuclear industry, which was largely shut down after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster.

The Abe government is well aware of the deep-seated hostility in Japan, especially in the working class, to the construction of nuclear weapons. That opposition stems not only from the devastation of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by US atomic bombs in 1945, but also from the repression and crimes committed by Japan’s wartime militarist regime.

Within Japanese ruling circles, however, there has been a barely concealed ambition to have a nuclear arsenal. Japan’s extensive nuclear industry was established in part to ensure that the country had the capacity to build such weapons. Leading members of Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have on more than one occasion sought to open up a public debate on the issue.

Abe’s finance minister Taro Aso, a former prime minister, declared in 2006 that there was nothing wrong with discussing whether Japan should possess nuclear arms. A *Japan Times* article last month, entitled “Nuclear arms card for Japan,” noted that politicians who had advocated nuclear weapons, officially and unofficially, included former prime ministers—Nobusuke Kishi (Abe’s grandfather), Hayato Ikeda, Eisato Sato, Yasuo Fukuda and Aso.

During the election campaign last year, Shintaro Ishihara, who was an LDP member until last year and now leads the extreme nationalist Japan Restoration Party, declared: “It’s high time Japan made simulations of possessing nuclear arms,” saying that it would be a form of deterrent against China. He has previously insisted that Japan had to have nuclear weapons.

The same *Japan Times* article reported that the Japanese government in September 2006 compiled an internal report examining “the possibility of domestically producing nuclear weapons.” A Defence Ministry source told the newspaper that the secret document had been produced by the Foreign Ministry and had aroused serious concerns in the US State Department.

According to the article, the report found that it would take three to five years and 200 to 300 billion yen (\$US2.2 to 3.3 billion) for Japan to manufacture nuclear weapons. A significant obstacle was the impurity of the plutonium produced in Japan’s commercial power reactors. The Rokkasho reprocessing facility, which has taken more than \$US21 billion and two decades to build, would be able to provide weapons-grade plutonium. No date has been set for its start up but the Japan Atomic Energy Commission and the plant’s operator, Japan Nuclear Fuel, say it could be as early as October. However, the Nuclear Regulation Authority has indicated that safety guidelines will not be ready until December.

At present, it appears unlikely that the Japanese government has made a decision to build nuclear weapons. To do so would require ending international inspection of its nuclear facilities, withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and abrogating other nuclear agreements, including with the US. Yet, the issue is clearly being discussed in ruling circles and preparations are being made.

The Obama administration might not want a nuclear-armed Japan, but its aggressive “pivot to Asia” aimed at containing China, has encouraged right-wing, militarist sections of the

ruling elite in countries throughout the region. Abe has already announced the first increase in the Japan's defence budget in a decade and has declared his determination to counter, including militarily, any Chinese move to claim disputed islands in the East China Sea.

In March and April, Washington deliberately inflamed tensions on the Korean Peninsula, provocatively sending nuclear-capable strategic bombers to South Korea, supposedly to counter North Korean threats. The US sought to use the crisis to put pressure on China for economic and strategic concessions, including to rein in Pyongyang.

However, the Abe government also exploited the North Korean "threat" to deploy anti-missile systems in Japan, and establish a political climate of fear to justify military rearmament—including potentially with nuclear weapons. The US is directly responsible for creating the conditions for a nuclear arms race in Asia that would enormously heighten the danger of conflict and war.

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