

The Next Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nuclear Weapons and US - Japan - China Relations

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In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

Japan was the first, the last and the only nation to be attacked with nuclear weapons. If it continues along the path set by Prime Minister Abe and the national security bureaucrats of his Liberal Democrat Party (LDP), it may also be the next.

The laws and norms restraining the development and deployment of nuclear weapons are dissolving in the same corrosive nationalism that led to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One by one laboriously negotiated constraints are disappearing. The [latest to go](#) was the INF Treaty. Mr. Abe's government did nothing to preserve it, and may have [intentionally hastened](#) its demise. For more than a decade LDP bureaucrats have been [lobbying](#) the US government to redeploy US nuclear weapons in Asia. Some Japanese officials, including **Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Akiba**, have discussed putting US nuclear weapons back in Japan, training the Japanese Self-Defense Force to deliver them and obtaining US permission to decide when to use them.

Fear of China

Government and military officials in Japan and the United States are in the grips of increasing anxiety about China. The steady growth of a national economy containing nearly one-fifth of humanity is the cause of their worries and [the animus](#) guiding some of President Trump's [trade warriors](#). China's gross domestic product (GDP) eclipsed Japan's in 2010 and will soon surpass the GDP of the United States. China has held military spending to [consistent 2% of GDP](#) since 1979, but combined with the rapid pace of Chinese economic growth Chinese military expenditures have created the impression of an equally rapid military buildup US and Japanese security experts assume must be aimed at something other than self-defense.

Japanese security experts [fear](#) China will act the same way Japan did in [the 1930s](#). US security experts [worry](#) China will behave the same way the United States does now. Neither feels comfortable living with those thoughts.

Both sets of officials imagine new nuclear weapons will relieve their anxiety. The Trump administration wants to [offset](#) China's increasing conventional military capabilities with new "low-yield" or "non-strategic" nuclear weapons the United States can use to avoid defeat in a future war with China. The nuclear thinking within Abe's LDP is [similar](#) but less clear cut. In a lengthy discussion about China in Washington in 2009, Mr. Akiba told me he believed that if Chinese leaders knew Japan had access to US nuclear weapons, a military trained to deliver them and a government with the authority to use them then China would

be less assertive on everything from territorial disputes to trade negotiations.



Estimate of casualties from a single Chinese nuclear warhead targeting Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan by [NUKEMAP](#).

Resurgent Nationalism

The elevation of national ambitions, priorities and interests over international agreements that subordinate all three to shared peace and prosperity is rapidly overturning decades of halting but inspiring successful efforts to not only avoid [another world war](#) but to create a more sustainable and equitable [global economy](#). The collapse of international nuclear arms control is accelerating in a context where all international organizations are under assault, and many of the international laws and norms that created them are being disparaged or ignored.

Abe's LDP was one of the first to subvert the post World War II consensus on the dangers of nationalism. The prime minister and the leaders of his party bristled at the continuation of ritual expressions of remorse for the consequences of Japanese militarism and chose instead to [ostentatiously honor](#) the perpetrators. They sought to restore Japan's national stature by overturning the "peace constitution" instituted in the wake of the atomic bombings and Japan's defeat. Steve Bannon admiringly told the LDP that Abe was [Trump before Trump](#). The only difference between Abe and [his American idol](#) is that the prime minister still values international [trade agreements](#) seen as essential to Japan's economic survival.

It is unlikely President Trump is self-consciously leading an organized effort to redirect US foreign, economic and military policy. His only clear interest—the focus of all his presidential activity—appears to be simple self-aggrandizement. But the aberrant character of his campaign and his government [repelled](#) traditional US foreign policy elites and attracted a cabal of sycophants, opportunists and ideologues, like Bannon, who mobilized longstanding popular resentments against post-war US internationalism that Trump shared and articulated. Public support for Trump's "America-first" orientation enabled his underlings to [institutionalize](#) a rapid US withdrawal from many of its international obligations.

China, on the other hand, embraced the idea of [global community](#) and emerged as one of internationalism's most [vocal defenders](#). This difference may provide a new ideological foundation for anti-Chinese policies similar to those that organized US-China relations during the Cold War.

Precarious Planning

The war all three nations imagine might come would be [fast and vast](#). US plans include preemptive long range missile strikes deep into central China. US leaders refuse to rule out the possibility that some of those missiles would be armed with nuclear warheads.

Chinese plans include large-scale missile launches at every imaginable US military target on its periphery, including US military bases in Japan. Some of China's missiles are capable of carrying either nuclear or conventional warheads. Chinese leaders have repeatedly stated they will never, [under any circumstances](#), be the first to use nuclear weapons but US and Japanese officials don't believe them.

Within minutes of the beginning of a war between China and the United States—a war Abe’s [new interpretation](#) of the Japanese constitution obliges Japan to join even if it is a not party to the dispute that starts it—there will be hundreds of missiles headed for scores of targets spread over an incredibly large area of East Asia. The first things to be destroyed will be the antennas, radars and computer networks commanders on all sides rely upon to assess what’s happening and communicate with their troops. None of them can be certain some of the missiles headed in their direction are not armed with nuclear warheads.

In the midst of this fast-moving high-stakes chaos it is not inconceivable that a nuclear weapon could be used by either side, perhaps without authorization or by mistake, igniting a much broader nuclear war that could obliterate Japanese urban populations near US military bases and major metropolitan areas in the continental United States.

Delusional Thinking

Even more frightening is the belief of Japanese and US defense officials that they can use low yield nuclear weapons first to control the escalation of the war. They imagine if they use these nuclear weapons China will give up the fight without retaliating. The idea is an old one stretching all the way back to the beginning of the nuclear age.

The Chinese communist leadership faced this type of US nuclear threat [before](#) during the Taiwan Straits Crisis of the 1950s. They did not have nuclear weapons then but were allied with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union. Declassified Chinese and Soviet archives show China’s leaders were prepared to take the blow and continue to fight. They did not expect Soviet retaliation on their behalf so long as the scale of the US nuclear attack was limited. Soviet leaders, however, insisted they must retaliate in order to preserve their own credibility.

It is impossible to know how a nuclear-armed China would respond today. I suspect even China’s leaders do not know what they would do. There is, however, a reasonable chance it would not be what US military planners expect. The United States foreign policy and defense establishment does not have a very good [track record](#) when it comes to understanding Chinese thinking or predicting Chinese behavior.

China does not have low yield nuclear weapons so if it did retaliate, even in a very limited way, it would be with missiles carrying nuclear warheads with an explosive force 30-40 times larger than the weapons the US dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One [classified Chinese text](#) on the operations of its nuclear forces suggests they would choose a relatively isolated but important military target in the theater of war, like Okinawa or Guam. A single Chinese nuclear warhead [targeting Kadena](#) Air Base in Okinawa would kill approximately 90,000 people and injure 200,000 more, most of whom would be innocent Okinawans and the families of the 18,000 American and 4,000 Japanese personnel who work there. It’s hard to believe either side would be able exercise “escalation control” at that point in an already devastatingly massive conflict.

Lessons Worth Remembering

We’ve managed to avoid sliding into another “great power” conflict for 74 years because up until very recently our governments understood the dangers of nationalism and the necessity to subordinate national interests to international law and organization. Japan’s peace [constitution](#) embodies this better than any other legal document of the post-war era.

“Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

The constitution may have been imposed by the United States at the end of WW II but the Japanese people came to cherish it and transformed those commitments into a pillar of Japan’s post-war national identity.

I find it sadly ironic that US officials have been pressing their Japanese counterparts to abandon that language for decades to no avail until Abe’s LDP pledged to restore Japan’s national honor and autonomy by finally capitulating to this foreign demand.

Japan’s new nationalists and their US counterparts justify their challenge to the post-war international consensus by pointing to the rise of China. The implication is that China, not the United States and Japan, is to blame for the disintegration of the international order. Rhetorically, at least, nothing could be farther from the truth. The key component of the Chinese Communist Party’s foreign policy is the [concept](#) of a “community of common human destiny.” The five aims of the policy are to “build enduring peace, universal security, shared prosperity, openness and tolerance and a clean and beautiful world.”

Not exactly *Mein Kampf*, is it.

Despite its many [horrible faults](#), the Chinese government is not championing nationalism or disparaging internationalism. It has a number of seemingly intractable sovereign disputes with some of its neighbors, including Japan, but those disputes do not necessarily foretell the emergence of another Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany or Soviet Union.

I’ve spent most of the last thirty-five years living, studying and working in China. The one constant in the breathtaking transformation of that country during this period is the consistently enormous gap between US perceptions of what is happening in China and the reality I experience when I am there. It’s possible US and Japanese fears may be exaggerated or misplaced.

Attempting to address those fears by exerting pressure, waging trade wars and flooding East Asia with new nuclear weapons will put all three nations on the path to a war none of them can win. The only way out of our present difficulties is to negotiate mutually acceptable compromises in the interest of the common good.

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Gregory Kulacki *researches the cross-cultural aspects of nuclear arms control negotiations between the United States, China and Japan.*

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