

Japan's defence minister resigns over remarks on US dropping of atomic bombs

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Japan's defence minister, Fumio Kyuma, resigned on July 3, just three days after he provoked public outrage by declaring that the US "could not help" but drop atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945. Kyuma's rapid political demise not only revealed the continuing deeply-felt hostility in Japan to the US atrocities six decades ago, but the growing public opposition to the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and its militarist policies.

Kyuma's comments were part of a speech delivered at the Reitaku University in Kashiwa on June 30. Having been the only nation to suffer atomic attacks, official Japanese policy has for decades been to oppose any use of nuclear weapons and to call for nuclear disarmament. In a break from the past, Kyuma justified the atomic bombing of Japan as being necessary to prevent the landing of Soviet troops and the division of the country like Germany.

"There was nothing Japan could have done if [the northern island of] Hokkaido had been taken [by Soviet forces]. On that point, I now have come to accept in my mind that in order to end the war it could not be helped that an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki and that countless numbers of people suffered great tragedy," Kyuma declared.

Kyuma's remarks undermined US claims that the incineration of two Japanese cities was necessary to save American lives. In fact, as Kyuma made clear, the major US preoccupation was to bring the war to a close as quickly as possible to prevent a Soviet advance into China, Korea and Japan. At the same time, the willingness of Washington to use these devastating new weapons was a clear threat to the Soviet Union itself.

The US dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima August 6, 1945, killing at least 140,000 people, even though Tokyo was already suing for peace. On August 8, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and launched a major offensive against Japanese troops in Manchuria.

The following day, the US dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, slaughtering 74,000 people.

In announcing Japan's unconditional surrender on August 15, Emperor Hirohito pointed to America's "new and terrible weapon". Two days later, however, the emperor's order to the armed forces to stop fighting, made no mention of the atomic attacks, but emphasised the Soviet threat. In less than two weeks, the Soviet army had crushed the one million-strong Japanese army in Manchuria and advanced deep into Korea, as well as into the Kuril Islands, north of Hokkaido.

The levelling of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a monstrous war crime for which the US has never been held to account. While the post-war alliance between the US and Japan effectively buried the issue, the tragedy left a deep psychological scar on Japanese society, forcing successive governments to promote the abolition of nuclear arms as standard policy. Kyuma's remarks immediately provoked opposition, particularly in Nagasaki where he represents one of the lower house districts.

On the evening of the speech, amid heavy rain, 100 survivors of the Nagasaki bomb held a protest against Kyuma's comments. Hirotmai Yamada, the 76-year-old secretary general of the Nagasaki Council of A-bomb Sufferers, told *Asahi Shimbun*: "It was an outrageous statement. The prime minister should immediately fire him [Kyuma]."

Masahito Hiro from the Nagasaki Global Citizens Assembly for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons said: "I am angry because a cabinet minister from Nagasaki, which was hit by an atomic bomb, has the obligation to continue to argue that use of nuclear weapons should never be allowed." Kenzaburo Oe, Nobel prize-winning writer, also denounced Kyuma's comments as "criminal".

Kyuma quickly retracted the comment and apologised

the next day. “I think it was wrong to drop the atomic bombs when Japan was heading for defeat. I still wonder why the United States had to do that,” he said. But demands for his resignation continued to build, including from the Liberal Democratic Party’s coalition partner, New Komeito. Ichiro Ozawa, leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), went one step further, calling on Abe to demand an apology from the US over the dropping of atomic bombs.

The uproar provoked an immediate crisis for Abe. His embattled government is facing the prospect of a debacle in the upcoming upper house elections on July 29. In stepping down on July 3, Kyuma declared: “I didn’t want my comment to negatively affect the next election. I decided to step down so that my careless comment would not be a minus.”

More fundamentally, the scandal is a blow to Abe’s efforts to remove all the post-war restrictions on the Japanese military, in the name of making Japan “a normal nation”. Kyuma was only appointed in January to the first fully-fledged defence ministry since 1945. Before that, he headed Japan’s defence agency, which controlled the country’s “self-defence forces”. The previous designation was an attempt to circumvent the so-called pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution, which bars the use of the military for aggressive purposes. Abe is also preparing to change the constitution.

Kyuma has been plagued by controversy. In January, he cautiously criticised the Iraq war as a “mistake,” provoking a diplomatic row with Washington. US Vice President Dick Cheney refused to meet Kyuma when he visited Japan and Australia in February to strengthen defence ties. Kyuma has also criticised the US as being “too bossy” over the relocation of US military bases in Japan.

These criticisms of the US clearly created difficulties for the Abe government, which has based its foreign policy on full support for the Bush administration’s “war on terror”. It is possible that his speech at Reitaku University was a rather ham-fisted attempt to patch up relations with the US. Like several other Japanese politicians, he may have been trying to create the political climate for Japan’s eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons. Whatever Kyuma’s exact calculations, he clearly misjudged the depth of popular opposition in Japan not only to atomic arms but also the broad agenda of Japanese remilitarisation.

The new defence minister, Yuriko Koike, Abe’s former national security adviser, will not change the previous

policy. She is known as a Middle Eastern expert, who graduated from Cairo University and can speak fluent Arabic. Her prominent role, firstly in the cabinet of Junichiro Koizumi and now Abe’s, points to Tokyo’s growing strategic focus on the Middle East, the source of most of Japan’s oil supplies. Koike told the *Financial Times* in a recent interview: “By the strong will of Mr. Abe we would like to take a more assertive policy. He has brought momentum to that process.”

Immediately after assuming her new job, Koike issued the 2007 defence white paper, which underlined Japan’s more aggressive stance in the region. It accused China of “aiming to build capacity to perform operations in waters further and further from its shores”. The paper also warned that North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs “are becoming even more serious,” although Pyongyang had recently agreed to shut down its main nuclear reactor.

Koike was, however, compelled to respond to the widespread public anger caused by Kyuma’s remarks. She cautiously criticised the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as “an outright challenge to human beings” and promised the government would continue to work for “abolishing nuclear weapons”. At the same time, she emphasised the need to “firmly maintain” the US-Japan alliance.

Kyuma’s resignation is just one more sign of trouble for Abe. His approval rating is now to below 30 percent—compared to more than 60 percent when he took office last September. Embroiled in scandals, including the loss of 50 million pension records and the suicide of a former agriculture minister, Abe’s political future is now in the balance at the July 29 upper house elections.

The entire episode reveals the extent to which the political establishment as a whole, which has fully backed Japanese remilitarisation, is at odds with popular antiwar sentiment.



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