

Japanese government reveals secret nuclear agreement with the US

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Earlier this month, the Japanese government revealed the existence of a secret agreement with the US, dating back to the early 1960s, allowing the American military to bring nuclear weapons into the country. The exposure will add to existing strains on US-Japan relations since the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won office last August, ousting the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Soon after taking office, the Democrat government established a six-person Foreign Ministry panel to investigate secret treaties with the US. During the election campaign, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama had called for a more equal relationship with the US and closer ties with Asia. At the same time, he made clear that the US alliance would remain the cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy.

The LDP, which had held office for most of the previous half century, had cemented the Cold War alliance with the US, which took Japan under the American nuclear umbrella. Japan, which played a junior role in the arrangement, helped the US to maintain a number of major military bases in the country, which were used by the American military in its wars in Korea and Vietnam.

During the election, Hatoyama made a definite pitch to popular anti-war sentiment over Japan's involvement in the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. He ended Japan's naval refuelling operation in the Indian Ocean to assist US military operations in Afghanistan, but promised to provide economic aid to the Afghan occupation. His government is calling for a renegotiation of an agreement with Washington to relocate a US Marine base in Okinawa.

The six-member panel said LDP governments had made three secret agreements with the US: one to allow US

naval vessels to carry nuclear weapons into Japanese ports; the second to permit the US military to use bases in Japan without prior consultation in the event of war on the Korean Peninsula; and the third to bear the costs of the 1972 return of Okinawa to Japanese rule. The panel also found that many key documents were missing, possibly intentionally destroyed.

The nuclear agreement is particularly sensitive in Japan, the only country to have been bombed with nuclear weapons. The US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 reduced the two cities to rubble, killed more than 100,000 people in the short-term and injured and permanently disfigured many more.

The panel's report was an embarrassment to the LDP in particular. "The Japanese government offered dishonest explanations, including lies, from beginning to end. This attitude should not have been allowed under the principle of democracy," the report declared. It did, however, offer a justification of the LDP's action, saying it had not been easy to balance "between a nuclear deterrence strategy in the Cold War era and the Japanese people's anti-nuclear sentiment".

Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada said it was "extremely regrettable" that LDP governments covered up the nuclear deal from "the Japanese [people], even to parliamentary sessions, even after the end of Cold War". At the same time, Okada made it plain that the government remained wedded to the US military alliance and would, in the case of emergencies, allow the US to bring nuclear weapons into Japan, "even if it may affect its political fortunes".

The Democrats' exposure of the "secret treaties" is somewhat theatrical. The existence of the treaties has long been confirmed by declassified American documents,

which successive LDP governments consistently denied, for fear of provoking public anger.

As a defeated power in World War II, and dependent on the US during the Cold War, Japan had little option but to agree to US demands. Japan signed a formal security treaty with the US in 1951, which was revised in 1960 amid mass protests. A secret addendum to the revised treaty clarified that the phrase “major changes to equipment” requiring prior consultation with the Japanese government referred to “the introduction into Japan of nuclear weapons, including intermediate and long-range missiles”.

The issue of nuclear-armed warships and submarines entering Japanese ports without prior consultation was agreed in the early 1960s and clarified in a Japanese Foreign Ministry briefing document of January 1968. The document stated that “there is no option but to continue in our present position” of allowing nuclear-armed US warships to enter Japan. In the margins are the names of successive prime ministers and foreign ministers and the date that they read or had been briefed on this arrangement. The last entry was in August 1989.

Foreign Minister Okada told the media that “we cannot confidently say no nuclear weapons were brought in”. In all likelihood, nuclear-armed US warships and submarines regularly stopped over in Japanese ports, without notifying Tokyo. The standard US operating procedure has been to neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear warheads on its warships entering foreign ports.

The attitude of LDP governments was duplicitous. The LDP adopted a policy of three non-nuclear principles in 1967, banning the possession, production and entry of nuclear weapons into the country. LDP Prime Minister Eisaku Sato eventually won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1974 for implementing this anti-nuclear stance.

Until Okinawa’s return to Japan in 1972, the US had stationed both tactical and strategic weapons on the island, aimed primarily at China. During the negotiations over Okinawa, the minutes of a meeting in October 1969 show that the US opposed Tokyo’s position of making the island nuclear-free in line with the rest of the country. Faced with US intransigence, Sato relented: “If they inform us it’s necessary [to reintroduce nuclear weapons] because of an emergency, then we will say ‘yes’.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US announced it would stop loading tactical nuclear weapons onto its surface warships and submarines. Foreign Minister Okada claimed that this meant that nuclear weapons had not been brought into Japan for the past two decades. However, the US military continues to deploy strategic nuclear weapons, such as cruise missiles and long-range ballistic missiles, on its warships and submarines.

The Democrats’ exposure of the secret agreements has been cautious. While asserting a more independent foreign policy, the government does not want to alienate the US. Prime Minister Hatoyama told reporters that it was “important not to let the panel’s verification undermine the Japan-US relationship”. Washington’s response has been low key. A State Department official declared that the US understood “the special sentiment of the Japanese people regarding nuclear weapons” while reaffirming that “we do not discuss the presence or absence of nuclear weapons aboard specific ships, submarines or aircraft”.

The Hatoyama government has released the report now, in part to try to bolster its flagging fortunes as it prepares for crucial upper house elections in July. Amid continuing economic turmoil and a deepening social crisis, support for the Democrats has plunged since they won the lower house election last August. A recent Kyodo News poll found that only 26.9 percent of respondents would vote for the DPJ, down 6.7 points since February, and just ahead of the LDP on 26.3 percent. The remaining 46.8 percent declared they would vote for a third party or remained undecided.

While the DPJ is trying to score points off the LDP’s record on the nuclear issue, there is no indication that the government is changing the previous policy. Hatoyama has cynically reaffirmed the previous three non-nuclear principles, but continues to allow US warships and submarines into Japan without challenging US ambiguity on the presence of nuclear weapons.



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