

Nuclear Disarmament after Expiration of the New START: Japan's Option

Masato Tainaka

Executive Director of the News and Analysis Center on Nuclear Issues, Asahi Shimbun

As Russian and U.S. leaders push for “rule by force” in Ukraine and the Middle East, the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) this past February is not merely an event marking “the end of one legal framework for U.S.-Russia arms control.” New START had provided the minimum level of governance for nuclear order through its limits on strategic nuclear weapons and verification mechanisms, but now that final safeguard has been lost. This also signifies the collapse of the premise underpinning the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime, which has long relied on the implicit expectation that leaders of nuclear-armed states—including the U.S. and Russia—will ultimately act wisely. The NPT, which entered into force in 1970, has imposed an obligation on the five nuclear-armed states—the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France, and China—to engage in good-faith nuclear disarmament negotiations; however, the consequences of its actual effectiveness, which depended heavily on political will, have now become apparent.

Revising the Three Non-Nuclear Principles: Heightening Vigilance and Nuclear Risks in East Asia

Following the expiration of the New START treaty, nuclear risks in East Asia are looming as a “reality for the parties involved.” In discussions surrounding the NPT, concerns have been raised about the resulting void in verifiable agreements following New START’s expiration and the need for a new framework. Japan, situated downwind of nuclear-armed states such as China, Russia, and North Korea, is one of the regions expected to suffer the greatest damage from radioactive fallout in the event of a nuclear attack. Yet, the country’s policy language for managing nuclear risks remains weak. The debate surrounding the Three Non-Nuclear Principles symbolizes this “weakness.”

In the context of revising the three basic security policy documents, the Takaichi administration is considering revising the “no introduction” principle within the Three Non-Nuclear Principles. To begin with, relaxing the “no introduction” principle, which has already been rendered toothless by “secret agreements” between the Japanese and U.S. governments, could not only

send a political signal that further stirs distrust among neighboring countries and heightens tensions in East Asia, but also conflict with the NCND (neither confirm nor deny) policy, a pillar of U.S. nuclear policy. As long as the U.S. side does not officially clarify whether U.S. naval vessels are equipped with nuclear weapons, revising the “no introduction” principle is unlikely to reduce nuclear risks; rather, it risks only heightening vigilance in the East Asian region.

Break Free from Reliance on the Nuclear Umbrella and Advocate for a No First Use Policy

What Japan needs now is a policy shift in the opposite direction. First, rather than taking reliance on the U.S. “nuclear umbrella” for granted, Japan should directly propose, as part of the agenda for the U.S.-Japan Alliance, a shift toward reducing the role of nuclear weapons, specifically through a No First Use policy and the concept of the “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons. These two principles limit the role of nuclear weapons to deter nuclear attacks and prohibit the use of nuclear weapons against conventional, biological, or chemical weapons, therefore contributing to the risk reduction of nuclear war.

What is crucial here is the fact that Japan once stood on the side of pushing back against that direction. Toward the end of the Obama administration, as the U.S. side was considering a “sole purpose” policy, the Japanese side expressed opposition, citing concerns about the impact on the alliance. According to a nuclear policy official in the Obama administration whom I interviewed, while the U.S. side maintained that conventional forces were sufficient to deal with North Korea, the Japanese side argued that the option of using nuclear weapons was necessary even in cases involving non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. However, it is precisely this concept of leaving “room for nuclear use” that preserves nuclear weapons as a policy option and lowers the threshold for their use. The goal of the No First Use policy and the “sole purpose” doctrine is to reduce the risk of nuclear war by shifting toward a framework that minimizes the role of nuclear weapons and relies instead on conventional forces and other means. If Japan, as a nation that has suffered atomic bombings, seeks to “strengthen the nuclear umbrella” and thereby hinders the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons, it will be contributing to an increase in the risk to its own survival.

Second, the Three Non-Nuclear Principles should not remain merely a “basic national policy”; they should be enshrined in law to establish them as an institutional framework. The very fact that a review of the “no introduction” principle is being debated demonstrates that these

principles can change on a whim depending on the “convenience of the ruling administration.” Leaving room in the system for “exceptional introductions” alone undermines the safety of the Japanese people, even before considering the issue of deterrence.

DO NOT Ignore the NPT’s “Exceptions”; Fulfill the “Clear Commitment” to the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons

Third, it is essential to restore the commitments of the NPT regime in its present form. The 1995 indefinite extension of the NPT, following the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, was adopted as a package that included the “Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament” and the Middle East resolution, and called on nuclear-weapon states to take concrete actions such as the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the commencement of negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).

When I first covered the 2000 NPT Review Conference at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the conference unanimously adopted a final document that included a “clear commitment” to the total elimination of nuclear weapons, and I felt that a path toward nuclear abolition had come into view. The 2010 Review Conference agreed on a 64-point action plan that included reducing the role of nuclear weapons and principles of transparency and irreversibility. The problem is not the lack of agreement, but the fact that implementation has stalled.

The key here is a perspective that refuses to leave “exceptions” unaddressed. The 1995 Middle East resolution called for efforts to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, in the Middle East. However, at the 2015 Review Conference, which I covered on site, an attempt to include a meeting schedule to discuss this in the final document was met with opposition from the United States, the United Kingdom (and Canada)—who sought to protect Israel, a nuclear-armed state that is not even a party to the NPT—therefore unable to evade the ultimate failure to adopt the final document. Consequently, I witnessed firsthand how the legitimacy of the NPT regime is being eroded from within by the preservation of these “exceptions.”

In light of the U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran, it would be incomplete to focus solely on the suspicions surrounding Iran’s nuclear development—a signatory to the NPT—at the NPT Review Conference currently underway since April 27. Reprehension should also be directed at

Israel's nuclear weapons capability despite its non-membership in the NPT, as well as at the perceived double standard of the United States in having tolerated this situation. This is because, within the NPT framework—which inherently suffers from the weakness of inequality, having initially permitted only five countries (the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France, and China) to possess nuclear weapons for the time being—tolerating exceptions will hollow out the system itself. If this dysfunction continues while nuclear-armed states fail to fulfill their “promises,” one must conclude that the very survival of the NPT framework is in jeopardy.

The TPNW Promotes a Shift in Thinking from National Security to Human Security

Fourth, we must shift the focus of nuclear disarmament from “national security” to “human security.” In this sense, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which advocates for the relief of nuclear victims, does more than simply complement the NPT. It is a normative framework that positions the very existence of nuclear weapons as unacceptable on humanitarian grounds, separates the issue of nuclear weapons from the discretion of states, and reframes it within the context of universal humanitarian and human rights law.

We must also drive a wedge into the rhetoric used to justify the use of nuclear weapons. Being the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate for its role in establishing the “nuclear taboo” as a norm, The Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (Nihon Hidankyo) has long demanded that the United States acknowledge that the atomic bombings violated international law, apologize to the survivors, and work toward creating a world without nuclear weapons through its 1984 Basic Demands of Atomic Bomb Survivors.

This demand is not about settling past accounts. It is rather an ongoing policy demand aimed at strengthening norms that do not justify the use of nuclear weapons. Now is the time to break the 80-year cycle of negativity in which the attack on Pearl Harbor and the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been used to justify one another. As long as the United States' use of nuclear weapons continues to be justified, leaders of hostile nuclear-armed nations will be able to continue exploiting this as a “license for impunity.”

Ultimately, as confidence in the “nuclear umbrella” wavers under the Trump administration, what Japan needs is not to increase “additional options” based on the premise of nuclear weapons. Rather, it must strengthen the norms and institutions that prevent the use of nuclear weapons. Japan should collaborate with non-nuclear middle powers in Asia, the Global South,

and Europe to press for the reaffirmation and implementation of existing NPT agreements, advance the universalization of the TPNW, and promote the restoration of the “rule by law.”

The Overlooked Reality: “Nuclear Powers Are Also Victims” and “Nuclear Weapons Are Evil; Nuclear Weapons Are Poison”

Here, we as citizens must redefine the very language we use to discuss nuclear issues. When we frame the nuclear issue solely in the language of national security—as a choice between “having nuclear weapons or not”—we overlook a crucial reality: that “nuclear powers are also nations of victims.” Without exception, the nations that have developed, tested, and possessed nuclear weapons have created large numbers of nuclear victims (global hibakusha) among their own citizens and in marginalized regions and communities. This perspective clearly demonstrates that, before nuclear weapons can be considered “tools of deterrence” for national security, they are, in essence, agents of radioactive contamination.

In this context, I would like to reframe the phrase “Nuclear Weapons are Evil; Nuclear Weapons are Poison” not merely as an ethical slogan but as a conclusion drawn from the histories of institutions and science. Nuclear weapons are not a manageable risk. They possess a “toxicity” that transcends time and space, eroding health, the environment, and society across generations. This is precisely why those in power with nuclear weapons have collaborated with international organizations to force people to tolerate radiation damage by dismissing it as “marginal” or a “negligible risk” and have implemented systems (social and administrative measures) that obscure the reality of radiation by cloaking it in scientific jargon—herein lies the structure of nuclear “domination” and “containment.”

Making the existence of global hibakusha visible and continuing to reinforce the norm that “nuclear weapons are not a necessary evil but an absolute evil” serves as a fundamental counter to those in the nuclear establishment who view nuclear weapons as a “manageable force” and provides the logic to dismantle the theory of nuclear deterrence, which the invisibility of radiation exposure has underpinned. Nuclear powers are also nations of hibakusha; nuclear weapons are evil and poisonous—without facing this reality head-on, there can be no path to nuclear weapons abolition.

About the Author



From 2007 to 2010, Masato Tainaka served as the Cairo correspondent for The Asahi Shimbun, covering U.S. military counterterrorism operations, the Iraq War, and the Israeli military's invasion of Gaza. In 2012, he was a Fulbright Journalist and a Visiting Researcher at Harvard University. He received his Ph.D. in the History of Science and Technology from Kobe University in 2022 and is currently a researcher at the International Peace Research

Institute, Meiji Gakuin University. His publications include *Japan Bound by the Nuclear Weapons* (『核に縛られる日本』, Kadokawa Shinsho, 2017) and the co-authored *The True Nature of Radiation “Containment”: Voices from Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bikini, and Fukushima* (『被ばく「封じ込め」の正体——広島・長崎・ビキニ・福島の声から』, Iwanami Booklet, 2025). He also translated *The Button: The New Nuclear Arms Race and Presidential Power from Truman to Trump* (Asahi Shimbun Publications, 2020).