

Reducing the risk of nuclear weapons use in the Asia Pacific
The 24th IPPNW World Congress in Nagasaki
4 October 2025

Strengthening the “nuclear taboo” - developments in Japan and our response
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At the outset, I thank IPPNW for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Last year the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Nihon Hidankyo for the Hibakusha’s efforts to demonstrate through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again, contributing to the establishment of “the nuclear taboo.” Yet, as Committee Chair Jørgen Watne Frydnes warned here in Nagasaki this July, this taboo is under threat, internationally. And I have to tell you that the taboo is eroding in Japan as well.

As already introduced, the recent three-year study by Nagasaki University RECNA and other institutions highlighted the catastrophic humanitarian impact of possible nuclear weapons use in Northeast Asia. With four nuclear-armed states and two nuclear-dependent states which host US forces, the region has a number of triggers to nuclear weapons use, including in relation to the situations over the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula.

Against this backdrop, let me present three challenging developments which represent Japan’s departure from its traditional non-nuclear commitment.

First, the threat and use of nuclear weapons are now being discussed by the Japanese and US militaries in practical terms.

Kyodo News reported this July that Tokyo and Washington have held multiple tabletop exercises to strategize a scenario in which a conflict broke out in East Asia and the US is pressured to use nuclear weapons.

They reviewed how to coordinate, how to manage public opinion, and how much information the US would share with Japan. These provisions have been incorporated into guidelines announced by the two governments last December but the contents of which have been kept secret. All of this is being conducted as part of the Japan-US Extended Deterrence Dialogue that was established in 2010 and upgraded to ministerial level last July.

Kyodo News further reported that in February last year, Japan and the US conducted a simulation exercise with a scenario that assumed that China hinted at the use of nuclear weapons against the US and Japan in the initial stage of a Taiwan contingency. To this, the Chief of Japan Self-Defense Forces Joint Staff strongly urged the US to respond with nuclear threats. The US commander initially did not take any measures due to concerns over escalation, but ultimately acquiesced to repeated requests by the Japanese counterpart for the US "to counter with nuclear threats to defend Japan."

In addition, according to a Reuters report this August, Tokyo and Washington are discussing how Japan's conventional military can practically support the US nuclear forces. Traditionally Japan's Self-Defense Forces were understood as being allowed to play purely defensive roles under its peace constitution. However, through the 2015 security law and the 2022 security and defense strategies, Japan is now acquiring long range missiles in the name of counter-strike capabilities. These conventional missiles of Japan can attack an enemy launch platform to deter or assist in a nuclear conflict.

Thus Japan's dependence on US nuclear weapons is not just a theoretical concept, but is becoming increasingly practical on the military ground. On August 6 this year, peace campaigners gathered in Hiroshima calling, "No Preparation for Nuclear War."

Second, Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles are wavering. Since 1967, Japan has maintained the Three Non-Nuclear Principles of not possessing, not producing and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons as a basic national policy.

During the Cold War, US vessels carrying nuclear weapons entered Japanese waters and called at Japanese ports. The Japanese government adopted the interpretation that temporary transit or port calls would not constitute an introduction of nuclear weapons, and made secret agreements with the US government in this regard. They thus long deceived the public, as if no nuclear weapons had been brought into Japan. The existence of this secret agreement was disclosed in 2010 under the Democratic Party government. In the practical sense, the US has ceased to deploy all sea-based tactical nuclear weapons under the 1991 Presidential initiative, therefore no nuclear weapons have been carried on US ships or submarines calling at Japanese ports since then.

But now, new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) are budgeted by the US congress, and may be operationally in place by the early 2030s. In this regard, whether or not Japan accepts port-calls of US vessels carrying nuclear missiles will likely become a subject of major debate. Recently, some politicians are openly advocating for a revision of the Three Principles, particularly the part of non-introduction, and others are calling for consideration of nuclear sharing.

Third, discussion is ongoing regarding Japan's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. In September, a governmental panel of experts recommended the Defense Minister to strengthen deterrence amid China's military expansion. The panel, led by the former chair of Keidanren, or the Japan Business Federation, called for exploring "next-generation propulsion systems," implying nuclear-powered submarines.

For Japan to obtain a nuclear-powered submarine, a revision of the 1955 Atomic Energy Basic Act that provides that the use of nuclear energy must solely be for peaceful purposes would be required. This would not be easy. However, as India has developed and is further developing nuclear submarines, Australia's acquisition is pursued under AUKUS, and the ROK is showing greater interest in acquiring them, a domino effect in this regard may take place.

What is the way out? We need to strengthen the nuclear taboo. The “nuclear taboo” is often understood as the norm against the use of nuclear weapons. But the human experience of Nagasaki and Hiroshima fundamentally rejects the very existence of nuclear weapons. We need to return to these basics. If you define the taboo narrowly as referring only to being against the use of nuclear weapons, this can open the way for arguments that justify possession or deployment in order to strengthen deterrence.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which entered into force in 2021 and a majority of the world has now joined, comprehensively prohibits nuclear weapons based on the recognition of their catastrophic humanitarian impact. It prohibits not only the development, possession, threat and use of nuclear weapons at all times, but also the deployment of another country’s nuclear weapons in your territory, as well as any assistance, encouragement and induction of anyone of any activities prohibited under the treaty. This comprehensive norm needs to be mainstreamed.

In Asia, it is notable that most Southeast Asian nations have joined the TPNW. For countries like Japan, ROK and Australia, the TPNW can be used as a platform to diversify their diplomacy in pursuit of a non-nuclear security. In this relation, let me draw your attention to the TPNW Manifesto that the Japan Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons put forward earlier this year to convince Japanese policy makers to adopt more sustainable security policy, by joining and utilizing the TPNW process, in combination with regional disarmament and confidence building measures in East Asia.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to further discussion later in this session.