‘Obamajority’
Or Realpolitik?
Japan’s Nuclear Double Standards

By Mikyoung Kim
While the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II remains the signature event that tells of the horrors of nuclear warfare, the anti-nuclear priorities of Hiroshima’s leaders today seem inexplicably at odds with the reality that Japan’s leaders face in shaping a national defense policy. Hiroshima-based professor Mikyoung Kim ponders whether there is a way to reconcile these competing views of what really defines security in the modern world.
THE CITY OF HIROSHIMA stands as living testimony to the modern irony that science and technology make possible our self-annihilation. But considering the chasm between the city’s antinuclear message and Japan’s nuclear reality, it often feels as if Hiroshima is not an integral part of the Japanese nation at all. The gap has become increasingly apparent with Japan’s “East Asian Community” debates and Hiroshima’s current “ObamaMajority” vision. The disconnect has been powerfully demonstrated by Tokyo’s reaction over the past several months to the Cheonan incident, in which North Korea was blamed for torpedoing a South Korean naval vessel on March 26 this year, killing 46 seamen.

The massive death toll from the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, of course, was a major impetus behind Japan’s unconditional surrender in the Asia-Pacific War. Following the war, the US military government in Japan, overseen by General Douglas MacArthur, strictly censored information regarding what had happened to the city. The post-war Japanese government similarly put a tight seal on eyewitness accounts (for example, sightings of “one more sun in the sky,” “black rain” and human deformities). The city remained invisible until the 1950s, when a Japanese tuna fisherman died from radiation exposure to a hydrogen bomb within US territory. Since that time, Hiroshima has become the authoritative symbol of anti-nuclear pacifism.

Hiroshima’s new slogan, “ObamaMajority,” which combines US President Barack Obama’s name with visions of a global majority in favor of total nuclear disarmament, was invoked by Mayor Tadatoshi Akiba at the United Nations and at the Mayors for Peace Conference in November 2009. This pitch, however, is causing some discomfort among national leaders in Japan, primarily because of the country’s complicated security relationship with the US.

Recently resigned Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama had repeatedly pledged to move a US military base out of Okinawa Prefecture and possibly out of Japan altogether. His inability to act on the base relocation proposal, which was a crucial component of his election platform under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), was a major reason for his resignation in June. Amid rising frustration with Tokyo’s limited capacity to negotiate with Washington, the Hatoyama government’s reaction to the Cheonan incident in South Korea was a telling reminder of the dichotomy of Japan’s anti-nuclear pacifism and its desire to become a “normal” nation.

It is a fact that the Hatoyama government had no keen interest in the sinking of the Cheonan, presumably by a North Korean torpedo, until his naïve approach towards the base relocation in Okinawa came to a dead end. When he could not reopen talks with the United States on the base relocation issue, Hatoyama tried to turn attention to the Cheonan incident. The sinking of the ill-fated ship suddenly became a powerful symbol of Pyongyang’s looming military threat to Japan. The incident conveniently allowed Tokyo to justify the change in its stance towards the US military base in Okinawa.

Despite their reform image, the DPJ’s top leaders have long shared the “North Korean military/nuclear threat” theory with their long-time rival, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). While admitting to the existence of US-Japanese secret agreements regarding the entry into Japanese territory of US nuclear weapons, the DPJ used the Cheonan incident to carve out room to revise Japan’s three non-nuclear principles: no introduction, no production and no use of nuclear weapons on its territory.

The Hatoyama government made it clear that Japan favored the US nuclear umbrella as protection against the highly hypothetical possibility of
a North Korean nuclear attack, and, therefore, put US considerations ahead of the Japanese people’s anti-nuclear sentiments. This stance is not likely to change under current Prime Minister Naoto Kan, although he did attend this year’s Hiroshima memorial event to mark the 65th anniversary of the bombing on Aug. 6. “Japan, as the only nation to have been attacked by the war-time atomic bombs, has a moral responsibility to lead the efforts toward realization of a world without nuclear weapons,” he said at the event, which was also attended for the first time by the American ambassador to Japan.

On other hand, the City of Hiroshima has capitalized on a different aspect of American politics. Obama’s pledge to promote nuclear non-proliferation, announced in Prague in April 2009, was well received by the international community, and especially so here in Hiroshima. Indeed, nobody can disagree with the idea that a world free of nuclear stockpiles would be a far better place. When the Hiroshima city leaders seized on the idea, however, the perspective shifted, at least in domestic Japanese affairs.

For the past 60 years, Japan has been under the US security umbrella. The nuclear facilities housed on US military bases in Japan are a powerful reminder of the binding bilateral security treaty. Interestingly, recently declassified documents indicate that former Prime Minister Eisaku Sato asked US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in 1965 to pledge to use nuclear weapons against China in the event of a war between Beijing and Tokyo. Sato ironically later won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974 for having introduced Japan’s three non-nuclear principles seven years earlier.

This stark contrast between Sato’s public behavior and private views exemplifies the moral deficiencies still rampant in Japan’s domestic political arena. Sato’s message for Japan was one of entitlement forged by its own experiences with nu-

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They reflect general public sentiment and national policy since the end of World War II, although they are a parliamentary resolution and have not been adopted into law. The three tenets state that:

1) Japan shall not possess nuclear weapons
2) Japan shall not manufacture nuclear weapons
3) Japan shall not permit nuclear weapons to be introduced into Japanese territory.

The principles were first outlined by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in a speech to the House of Representatives in 1967 as part of negotiations over the return of Okinawa from the United States. The parliamentary Diet formally adopted the principles in 1971.

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clear atrocity, namely, “you have done this to me, and you can do it again to our common enemy.” The true pacifist spirit of “No More Hiroshimas” was virtually absent in Sato’s actions and continues to pervade Japan’s domestic politics. This persistent double standard is apparent given the “Obamajority” appeal of a nuclear-free world at the same time as Japan is relying on the US for nuclear protection.

With or without “Obamajority,” Japan has the capacity independently to become a nuclear power. The amount of plutonium produced at its 53 nuclear power plants could be processed into hundreds of nuclear warheads in about one month. Additionally, the private sector has an advanced level of nuclear dual technology. This was most obvious when a precision-tool manufacturing company located in the Hiroshima Prefecture was indicted for exporting banned materials to North Korea and China. Moreover, a transportation company in the Kyoto Prefecture is facing similar charges for allegedly selling a special vehicle for transporting a missile launch pad to Pyongyang. Through such blatant examples, the anti-nuclear “Japan of the Peace Constitution” is nothing more than a theoretical claim.

Furthermore, the Japanese government’s reaction to the Cheonan incident sheds interesting light on the current debate about establishing an East Asian Community. “Community,” being different from “association,” often assumes a shared cultural ethos among members who try to defend and protect common interests and values. How can an East Asian Community sustain itself with the existence of North Korea, the alleged provocateur? It is not surprising that the “community” debates have been unfolding seemingly oblivious to the existence of the Kim Jong-il regime. The Cheonan incident has made it clear that domestic political needs supersede the normative rhetoric on an East Asian Community. The ruling elites in Japan prioritize the ability to govern domestically over the cultivation of an Asian communal spirit.

Hiroshima’s further irony in the 21st century lies with its divorce from the Japanese nuclear reality. Amid this confusion, piecing together Hiroshima’s spirit, Obama’s non-nuclear pledge, a quasi-nuclear Japan and the dream of an East Asian Community can be a big challenge. The separate stories of Japan and Hiroshima are a sure sign that the road to a nuclear-free world is going to be very bumpy indeed.

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