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Thinking the Unthinkable: Toward Japanese Nuclear Armament?

Wakamiya Yoshibumi speaks with Emmanuel Todd

[*The following dialogue reads rather like the classic dispute between the Pacifist and the Realist ("To protect the peace, prepare for war"; "But one mustn't . . .") carried to a higher level. But quantity becomes quality: when you are talking about nuclear weapons, the conversation is no longer the same as when you are talking about swords or even firearms. This is what Emmanuel Todd doesn't seem to grasp, while Yoshibumi Takamiya (at least partly) does.*

Todd argues correctly there is such a thing as nuclear deterrence, and that it is often effective. This is something that just about everybody knows, though there are many who hate to admit it. Todd is also correct that there are few who are ready to carry the logic of nuclear deterrence to its logical conclusion. But I wonder if he is himself? Nuclear weapons deter countries from attacking countries that possess them; they do not deter countries that possess them from attacking those that don't. Recent examples: it was only after the United Nations inspection team assured the U.S. that Iraq had no nukes or other weapons of mass destruction, that the U.S. invaded that country. And it was only after the DPRK, presumably learning from Iraq's experience, began trying to persuade the world that it has nukes and the missiles to deliver them, that the U.S. stopped calling it "evil" and returned to the negotiating table. It may turn out that the DPRK has been one of the most skillful employers of the force of nuclear deterrence in our time.

But for this nuclear – based peace policy truly to work, one would have to go much farther. Surely a world divided into nuclear have – and have not – countries will be far from stable. Wouldn't it also be necessary to provide nuclear weapons to Chechnya to protect it from Russia, to Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco to protect them from France, to the Palestinian Authority to protect it from Israel, to the Latin American states (especially Cuba and Venezuela) to protect them from the U.S., etc.? Why just Japan? One might respond, Because many of these countries mentioned might become aggressive, whereas Japan would not. But of the latter, I wouldn't be too sure.

Another difficulty with nuclear deterrence is that to make it effective it must be made believable. This means, you must persuade your potential enemies that you have people within your government who really are capable of destroying entire cities and all within them – civilians, women, children, the aged and infirm together with the doctors and nurses trying to take care of them, foreign ambassadors, foreign tourists, cats and dogs: every living thing. In short, you must persuade your potential enemies that you have people within your government who are mad. (I do not exaggerate: within the U.S. Strategic Command this is known as the "Madman Strategy ".) Without having such people with their fingers on the button, the "threat" is no threat, and therefore no deterrence. And of course the best way to persuade your adversaries that you have such people, is really to have them.

Wakamiya, on the other hand, while he expresses a healthy horror of possessing nukes, also seems to be locked within a contemporary Japanese illusion. That is, everyone knows that Japan is "protected" under the U.S. "nuclear umbrella". It is true that the Japanese government does not possess nuclear weapons under its own control. But still, the "nuclear umbrella" means that Japan has adopted the policy of nuclear deterrence. Remarkably, this is not mentioned, presumably set aside as a "U.S. problem", which does not interfere with Japan's self-image as a non – nuclear and peaceful country. C. Douglas Lummis]

Wakamiya Yoshibumi conducted this interview. Just after North Korea shocked the world Oct. 9 with its nuclear test, I met in Paris with French historian and political scientist Emmanuel Todd, author of Apres l'Empire (After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order). To my surprise, Todd, whose book prophesies the decline of the United States and points out the limits of a unipolar world, urged Japan to arm itself with nuclear weapons. Excerpts of that thought-provoking exchange follow:

Emmanuel Todd

Todd: Nuclear weapons are more frightening when they are unevenly distributed. Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki because the United States alone had them. But they were not used during the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. Only when India and Pakistan both possessed nuclear weapons did they sit down to negotiate peace. Only Israel has nuclear weapons in the Middle East, and China is the only nuclear power in East Asia, so if Iran and Japan come to possess them under certain conditions, the distribution would be more balanced and stable.

Wakamiya: That is an extremely provocative view. The Hiroshima A-bomb Dome was made a World Heritage site out of a desire to abolish nuclear weapons. Rejecting nuclear weapons is part of Japan's national identity. Acquiring nuclear arms is not an option for Japan.

Todd: I chose Hiroshima as my first destination when I visited Japan. Although I understand Japanese public sentiment, the Japanese should also look squarely at the reality of the world. An even greater structural problem is the presence of two unstable systems, namely the United States and China. As I explained in "After the Empire," the United States with its military might, tends to resort to war whenever it is about to decline, saddled with huge budget deficits. And that country is Japan's only military ally.

Meanwhile, as China faces trouble at home with stagnant wages and social inequities creating tensions, it is stirring anti-Japanese nationalism to let its public vent discontent outward. Such a country is Japan's trading partner.

Wakamiya: But saying Japan should arm itself with nuclear weapons just because of such circumstances is jumping to conclusions.

Todd: Nuclear weapons are a shelter that provides safety. Once a country gains nuclear weapons, it becomes free from military alliances

and will not be dragged into war. This idea is de Gaullist.

Wakamiya: But if Japan possesses nuclear weapons, it will not only cause the Japan-U.S. alliance to fall apart, but it would also cause China to grow increasingly wary of Japan and make Asia anxious.

Todd: In Japan and Germany, neither the family nor society is based on the principle of equality. Like relationships between older and younger brothers, the seniority system dominates society. In this regard, these countries are different from France, Russia, China and the Arab world. In World War II, Japan and Germany tried to become the big brothers of the world, and failed.

Postwar Japan is content to be America's little brother. It is afraid to become equal brothers like China and France.

Wakamiya: It is true that Japan was obedient to the United States, to which it lost World War II. But France, which was rescued by the United States, developed a rivalry with it. France also spearheaded the opposition to the Iraq war. How can it oppose its "benefactor"?

Todd: It is not simple rebellion, because France and the Anglo-Saxon world have been at odds with each other since the Middle Ages. The greatest reason that France possesses nuclear weapons is because it was repeatedly made a target of aggression. Nuclear weapons provided the quickest solution to its geopolitically unstable position.

Wakamiya: Statues of Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill stand in Paris. But Japan is under fire from neighboring countries for enshrining war criminals, including former Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, at Yasukuni Shrine. If Japan rids itself of its wartime trauma, Asia would become extremely wary of us. We have the economic strength and technology to make nuclear weapons, but have exercised self-restraint to maintain a balance.

Todd: We cannot live with the memories of World War II for millenniums. Europe is still obsessed with a sense of atonement for the Holocaust. That is why it tends to overlook the plight of Palestinians, and it is difficult to take the initiative in the Middle East. Since Japan has a strong sense of atonement for the war, even though it is a leading technological and economic power, it is unable to play a responsible role in international society. An "ethical standpoint" based on the past is not truly ethical.

Wakamiya: The real problem is the lack of strategic thinking that trades on "non-nuclear" principles. Moreover, in Japan, people who say we must not be fettered by the past tend to justify the past, just as others do with Yasukuni Shrine. Unlike you, many Japanese who are calling for nuclear armament also support continuance of the Japan-U.S. alliance.

Yet, there is no way the United States would recognize Japan's right to possess nuclear weapons.

Todd: What I found interesting about the Koizumi administration was the way it set off "nationalism for fun," by stimulating the public's nationalistic sentiments. It stuck with the prime minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine and with territorial claims to tiny islands that are clearly of secondary importance. In a sense, it is "phony nationalism" aimed at hiding the fact that Japan is completely submissive to the United States.

Wakamiya: That's an interesting viewpoint.

Todd: First, Japan has to think what kind of relationships it wants to build with the world. I agree that perhaps it is still too early for Japan to possess nuclear weapons under existing ideologies. There will surely be big problems with China and the United States. But if Japan comes to have nuclear weapons in order not to be caught up in disputes or to escape from U.S. aggressiveness, China would likely show a somewhat different reaction.

Wakamiya: If Japan, a model student of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty framework, were to announce its intention to possess nuclear weapons, all worldwide restraints on nuclear weapons would be lost. The world would face much greater risk of nuclear weapons being used. All balance would be lost, and if international terrorist groups get hold of them, the result is unimaginable.

Todd: If you are really afraid of nuclear proliferation, you must calm down the United States. American threats make it reasonable for countries like Iran or North Korea--and perhaps others--to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. When I attended a symposium on Iraq in Berlin, an American panelist said something that threatened France. Before I knew it, I was saying, "Unlike Iraq, France has weapons of mass destruction."

Wakamiya: When Japan first supported the Iraq war, I asked a high-ranking government official why Japan could not show more fortitude. I was surprised when he answered, "We don't have nuclear weapons like France." The Japanese government should be proud to announce to the world its determination not to possess nuclear weapons. It should use its resolve as a weapon in international politics. As the only country in human history to experience the ravages of atomic bombs, Japan has an obligation to convey the tragedy of what such weapons can do. Even if urged to possess nuclear weapons, Japan should decline. There is nothing wrong with being an "odd country."

Todd: That is an interesting idea, but if a country that was attacked by nuclear weapons were to possess them, it would set off international debate about nuclear weapons. It would provide a major turning point.

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Emmanuel Todd is a French political scientist and historian. He graduated from the Paris Institute of Political Studies and completed his doctorate in history at Britain's Cambridge University. He predicted the fall of the Soviet Union based on its declining birth rates in his 1976 book The Final Fall: An Essay on the Decomposition of the Soviet Sphere. He also wrote The Third Planet: Familial Structures and Ideological Systems (1983) and The fate of immigrants (1994). In Apres l'Empire (After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order) (2002), Todd predicts the fall of the United States as the only superpower and points out the limits of a unipolar world. He presents provocative and somewhat eccentric world views based on demographic trends and social indicators such as literacy rates. He was born in 1951.

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