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The White House Splits over Japanese Nuclearization

By SUGIURA Masaaki

The Wall Street Journal, which ran an editorial on August 29 entitled “Nuclear Missile over Tokyo; Accepting a nuclear North Korea probably means a nuclear Japan,” published again an article related to Japanese nuclear possession on September 4, which was contributed by a renowned scholar. According to the article, White House staffs are split on Japanese nuclear possession, and President Trump himself might see a nuclear Japan “not as a defeat, but as a victory of U.S. foreign policy.” Furthermore, the author analyzes that North Korean nuclear and missile tests will lead to the internal division in the American administration, and “The allegedly crazy Kim regime has managed to put the U.S. in a tight corner.”

This article was written by Walter Russel Mead, Fellow of the Hudson Institute which was founded by Herman Kahn, and Professor at Bard College. He argues, “[Kim Jongun] has exposed a deep divide in American thinking, laying bare the hard choices Washington may soon be forced to make,” and analyzes the current situation that the Trump administration is compelled to make a decision whether to admit Japan to possess nuclear weapons. Moreover, he mentions the possibility of Japanese nuclearization, “Close observers have long understood that North Korea’s belligerence and nuclear buildup are pushing Japan toward fielding its own nuclear weapons. No nonnuclear power in the world is nearer to a nuclear capacity than Japan. Many analysts believe it would take Tokyo only months to go from deciding to nuclearize to having the weapons.” Mead continues, “In the ensuing chaos, it’s likely that South Korea and Taiwan would follow suit, with at least Taiwan receiving quiet help from Japan.” Furthermore, regarding the discussion of nuclearization in Japan, he analyzes “Elite Japanese opinion is perceptibly shifting in favor of the nuclear option. Conservative nationalists there have long believed that a nuclear arsenal would allow Japan to resume its place as an independent great power, freed at last from its post-1945 dependence on the U.S. The Japanese public has been deeply skeptical, but North Korean threats and missile overflights — combined with doubts about American

commitment and reliability — are leading more people to think the unthinkable”.

Notably, Mead points out that White House staffs are divided over Japanese nuclearization. He says that all the top White House advisors believe “America’s interests are best served by maintaining the status quo in the Pacific,” while “Others, who may include President Trump, might see nuclearization of East Asia not as a defeat, but as a victory of U.S. foreign policy. China’s geopolitical ambitions would be contained by a nuclear Japan, South Korea, and maybe Taiwan. Washington could remove troops from Korea and cut the defense budget, while letting allies pay the costs of containing China.” In addition, regarding American engagement with East Asia if the United States maintains its commitments to nuclear deterrence, he comments “The US pays the most of the bills to defend the Pacific against China, risks war with countries like North Korea, and must further ‘bribe’ its allies by promoting purportedly job-destroying cheap imports from countries like South Korea. This option does not seem all that attractive to Mr. Trump’s ‘America First’ voters.” On the other hand, if the United States were to retreat from the Far East, he stresses the changes among the public and Congressional members, “Yet standing aside in East Asia would also represent a clean break with American strategic thought after World War II. For decades the U.S. has guaranteed the status quo in places like East Asia while providing ‘international public goods’ like the sea power that has kept the oceans open to all. Americans have kept the peace at a sustainable cost. It is no longer clear that U.S. public opinion supports this long-term strategy; neither Trump Republicans nor Bernie Sanders Democrats seem to think in these terms.” In addition, if the United States really withdraws from East Asia, he predicts “[It] would more likely to lead to arms races and military confrontation than to peaceful development. Beijing’s ambitions in the South China Sea threaten the security of trade routes on which Japan depends. North Korea’s drive for bigger bombs, and intercontinental missiles to deliver them, would only continue.”

Also, he suggests critical circumstances for the United States, “The North Korean crisis presents the U.S. with two deeply undesirable alternatives. On the one hand, Washington can abandon seven decades of national strategy and risk growing instability in Asia; on the other, it can risk an ugly and dangerous war with a vicious and unprincipled opponent. The Trump administration is trapped in a strategic dilemma with no easy escape.” Their arguments for Japanese nuclearization can resonate among policymakers in Japan. On September 6, an LDP veteran Shigeru Ishiba raised a question whether Japan should maintain the Three Non-Nuclear Principle that states “Japan shall neither possess nor manufacture nuclear weapons, nor shall it permit their introduction into Japanese

territory,” and argued “It is questionable to say that Japan does not accept nuclear weapons in her territory, while relying on American nuclear umbrella. Of course, I understand the sentiment to reject those arsenals into our homeland, and popular aversion to such an idea. However, we must think seriously whether our deterrence is sufficient without bringing American nuclear weapons in our territory.” But he denies a nuclearized Japan. Ever since the Sato administration adopted the Three Non-Nuclear Principle, it has become a “national credo,” but the international regime that the principle rests on is gradually collapsing now. The discussion on this issue is likely to be revitalized toward the extraordinary session of the Diet and the LDP presidential campaign.

(This is an English translation of the article written by SUGIURA Masaaki, Political Commentator, which originally appeared on the e-forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu (Hundred Views in Full Perspective)” of GFJ on September 7, 2017.)