

Time for Japan to support major nuclear reduction;
East Asian security dialogue will help
Nobuyasu Abe, former UN Under-Secretary-General

As the year 2012 opened, political observers were saying, “The efforts to move towards President Obama’s “a world without nuclear weapons” will have to take a backseat in a political year running up to the Presidential election.”

Nevertheless, former head of the US Strategic Forces, Gen. Cartwright, made a bold proposal recently that the US and Russia should reduce their total nuclear warheads to 900 each and gaining support.

The next target after the 2010 US-Russian New START is the reduction of whole nuclear warheads including the tactical nukes and non-deployed or warheads in reserve. The Cartwright proposal also seems to take into account the view that to involve China and other nuclear-armed states the US and Russia would have to come down to around 1,000 each.

Major American newspapers such as the New York Times expressed support urging to come out of the cold war obsessions. The proposal very much goes along the idea of moving step by step towards a nuclear-weapon-free world that Japan has been advocating for so many years. Now is the time, therefore, for Japan to express its strong support for such a drastic reduction of nuclear arsenals as proposed by Gen. Cartwright.

There may be a concern raised about such a drastic reduction against the background of unpredictable security environment in East Asia where Japan still depends on the American nuclear umbrella.

But, even if Japan still has to rely on the American deterrence, we do not need the many thousands of warheads. There are even experts who say that the US can maintain its deterrence with as few as 300 warheads.

As far as the US and Russia reduce their warheads in a balanced manner and China and other nuclear-armed states do not increase their nuclear holdings, we can reduce nuclear weapons still securing strategic balance and stability from deterrence theorists’ point of view.

The standard reporting format that the Japanese government proposed together with the other members of the NPDI group of ten foreign ministers provides an important basis for confidence-building essential for such major nuclear reduction.

In order to propose nuclear reduction in East Asian context two factors are important. First, the North Korean nuclear program has to be stopped or, if not, at least strictly contained. Second, China and the US and other countries should not fall into a state of arms competition.

To this end, the US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea should establish a process of an in-depth security and disarmament dialogue. It would be wonderful if North Korea can join such a dialogue in a meaningful way from the beginning but it cannot be easily foreseen when even the 6-Party talks cannot be resumed.

In order to move North Korea to real de-nuclearization, we have to persevere with the efforts to engage North Korea in meaningful 6-Party talks. But we should not be giving it a “veto” power to deny progress among other parties.

Can't Japan make an effective contribution to prepare grounds to promote such a drastic reduction of nuclear weapons as Gen. Cartwright proposed? I look to an active diplomatic initiative from Japan.

+ + +

Nobuyasu Abe, Director of the Center for the Promotion of Disarmament and Nonproliferation of the Japan Institute of International Affairs, is former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, 2003-06, and served as Japanese ambassador in Vienna, Riyadh and Bern.