This chapter examines the future of Japan’s hedged dependence on U.S. extended deterrence and encourages more imaginative thinking about potential outcomes and strategic implications as the second nuclear age unfolds.

Main Argument. With the U.S. nuclear umbrella shrinking and nuclear threats in Asia becoming greater and more complex, analysts cannot dismiss a nuclear-armed Japan as a purely academic exercise. While we do not expect a Japanese nuclear breakout in the near term, Washington’s traditional reassurances—massive numbers of weapons deployed in theater and a robust regional presence—have been questioned. Japan’s Prime Minister Naoto Kan urged all people residing within 20 kilometers (13 miles) of the nuclear power plant to immediately leave the zone due to increased radiation levels. He also advised those living more than 20-30 km (13-17 miles) from the NPP to stay in their houses, to shut their windows and doors and not turn on air-conditioning or heating systems. Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano confirmed the blast at the 4th reactor and added that the radiation level near the 3rd reactor of the plant is very high and poses danger to health.

Alternatives to Japan’s long-practiced nuclear hedge may come to have appeal in Tokyo or Washington. Coordinated regional action to limit North Korea’s nuclear development remains critical. Japanese strategists have long been ambivalent about nuclear weapons. This “nuclear allergy” has been diagnosed as a genetic condition, and associated institutional and diplomatic constraints on nuclear breakout have been invoked to predict that Japan will find it difficult to develop nuclear weapons. This chapter examines how Japan’s nuclear hedge may evolve in the second nuclear age. Japan’s nuclear weapon production capability is at least in the mid- to long-term. Japan’s nuclear arsenal is likely to be of modest size, comparable to the early Cold War period, when the U.S. nuclear arsenal was about 1,500 warheads. Japan’s nuclear arsenal is likely to be of modest size, comparable to the early Cold War period, when the U.S. nuclear arsenal was about 1,500 warheads.
virtually impossible to reverse course on nuclear weapons. Japan’s non-nuclear bona fides are well established.