A Japanese columnist today said Washington may soon force Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government to accept traditional safeguards on its nuclear materials unless it backs down from its confrontational stance with neighboring countries.

Norihiro Kato, a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times and literary professor at Waseda University, said in an Op-Ed piece in the newspaper that if Abe “continues on his confrontational agenda, his government may lose Washington’s support.”

“In that case, Japan will either have to submit to the same rules that apply to other countries on nuclear materials or isolate itself by openly flouting them,” he said.

Kato said one of the key indicators that the United States may change the nature of it support for Japan’s nuclear policy was reflected in the request by Washington in January that Japan return some 700 pounds of weapons-grade plutonium and an important supply of high-enriched uranium that was on loan to Japan for research purposes.
Japan announced at the third Nuclear Security Summit at The Hague that it would comply with the U.S. request.

But Kato said the materials involved were only part of the overall supply in Japan’s possession. Under a separate 1988 agreement, Japan is allowed to recover and store plutonium derived from fuel supplied by the United States for Japan’s power plants. That agreement is set to expire in 2018.

Kato said Washington’s request earlier this year might appear to be part of a broader effort to ensure the security of nuclear materials.

“But is has sparked speculation both in Japan and abroad that they U.S. government is worried about the Abe government’s belligerence and may be reconsidering extending the 1988 cooperation agreement,” Kato said.

If this were to occur, it would bring an end to Japan’s “ambiguous” policy of “technological deterrence,” which allows the country to maintain a technological and material capacity to produce a weapon to respond to any potential threat, he said. This policy, is not officially recognized by the government.