

Editorial

Public Fear Creates Contradictory and Risky Public Policy in Japan

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Japan's nuclear industry is in total disarray. The country's general consensus in favor of nuclear energy has been shattered. Before the the March 11 crisis at the Fukushima power plant, roughly 70 percent of Japan's population was in favour of nuclear energy; today 70 percent is against. Fear is driving public opinion.

There is a strong argument however that the public has got it wrong that Japan's nuclear reactors should be made more secure, not closed for the long term. The technology can be significantly improved, and valuable lessons can be learned from the Fukushima disaster. The costs of changing to alternatives to nuclear energy for this island nation with no coal, oil or gas reserves would be cripplingly expensive, and a giant backward step environmentally in the long term.

Atomic energy authorities calculate that each reactor would have a replacement cost of nearly \$400 million a year to diversify to gas and coal. It will also will have high environmental costs in terms of greenhouse gases, and can be expected to drive up the cost of electricity, causing Japanese companies to move to countries where energy is cheaper.

Japan is already being overshadowed by China in the region. It was overtaken by China last month as the world's second largest economy. Japan's defence budget has declined for nearly a decade, while China's is soaring. Japan is looking to upgrade its air defences, but already it is being financially drained by its earthquake and nuclear cleanup costs from last March.

Yet public fear is palpable. The fact that radiation is invisible... you can't see, smell or touch it – makes it particularly fearful. Even in Tokyo, far from the disaster site, many are afraid to buy local produce, or even wash vegetables in tap water. Some carry Geiger counters to the supermarket to check their purchases for radiation. These people want an end to nuclear energy. They do not believe that the fuel cores in the crippled reactors are in a safe and stable condition.

But you can't make good public policy based on fear.

At home, the government has shelved plans to build 14 domestic rectors by 2030. It is trying to cut demand for energy and diversify to natural gas, but only so much can be cut without losing productivity, and diversification means increasing dependence on foreign sources.

However Japan's new Prime Minister, Yoshihiko Noda has decided to support exports of nuclear technology. The policy is a classic example of NIMBY – "not in my backyard" – the technology is not good enough for Japan, but it is good enough for others.

This confused public policy is a result of the fact that the country can ill afford to give up its competetive edge in nuclear technology. Before the March 11 earthquake, Hitachi had plans to construct 38 overseas plants by 2030. Demand for nuclear power decreased after the Fukushima accident, particularly in Europe, but in many parts of Asia demand is still strong. Japanese companies have contracts to build reactors in Vietnam, Jordan and Lithuania.

Another powerful business incentive to continue advancing the technology is the prospect that the United States may very soon resume construction of nuclear reactors. The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission is expected to approve the construction and operation of four new reactors: two in Georgia and two in South Carolina. The proposed facilites are designed by Westinghouse Electric Co, a subsidiary of Toshiba, one of three large Japanese companies looking to export their nuclear technology.

Public fear will not be assuaged easily. Even before the final report on the Fukushima disaster is released, there is much evidence of lack of transparency in nuclear decision-making, poor plant management standards, misinformation, breakdown of communications and human error. Despite assurances that damage has been largely controlled, tons of highly radioactive water have continued to leak from one of the Fukushima Daiichi power plants. Cleanup costs are going to be extremely high. Five centimeters of contaminated topsoil, as one example, will have to be removed to make farms near Fukushima viable again.

On top of that the most seriously damaged power plant lost its insurance on Jan 15. Since power utilities are legally bound to have insurance contracts for all nuclear plants in case of an accident, Tepco, the public utility owner, and the government have been urgently creating special cash reserves and financial guarantees for the cleanup. New projections indicate Japan will have another large earthquake and tsunami within the next 30 years.

These are huge obstacles, but they can be overcome. Decisions about Japan's nuclear future need to be grounded in realism about what is best in the long run. The problem is not with nuclear energy itself, but with the safety of the technology that produces it.

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