

Japan - Behind the no-nuclear option: New energy policy seen as political fig leaf, given option for reversal

Saturday 1 December 2012, by [ITO Masami](#) (Date first published: 30 October 2012).

The triple-meltdown crisis that began last year at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant jarred the public out of its complacent attitude toward nuclear power and every other assurance made by the government and Japan Inc.

Suddenly, thousands of people were fleeing their homes in the fallout zones, possibly never to return again, as everything from fish to meat to rice and water joined the list of contamination threats.

Overnight, the public developed a collective voice. Housewives, professors, students, salarymen, seniors from all walks of life stood up to demand an end to Japan's dependence on atomic power, and its dangers.

People came from across the country to participate in rallies each Friday night outside the prime minister's office to raise this chorus.

Then finally last month, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and his Democratic Party of Japan-led government announced the nation would embark on a quest for alternative, green, sustainable forms of energy and rid Japan of nuclear power by the 2030s.

But the new policy, besides not being etched in stone, has drawn criticism for being ambiguous, unrealistic, a quick kowtow for votes and a way to keep the door back to nuclear power ajar.

What are the key points of the new energy strategy?

The government adopted the "Innovative Strategy for Energy and the Environment" on Sept. 14 to learn from the Fukushima crisis and fundamentally change the nation's course away from atomic power.

The main pillar would be the complete shutdown of all reactors by the 2030s. To achieve this, the government laid out three major goals: to limit the working life of reactors to 40 years, to only restart reactors that have been given stamped as safe by the new Nuclear Regulation Authority, and to ban the construction of new nuclear plants.

The government pledged to cover the nation's energy needs by diversifying its sources and tripling its use of renewable power by 2030, advancing the use of thermal power generation, and securing a steady supply of inexpensive fossil fuels. It also vowed to slash electricity consumption to 100 billion kwh in 2030 from 1.1 trillion kwh in 2010 and promote energy-saving measures to the entire public.

What prompted this zero-nuclear goal?

Public opinion.

The government was initially reluctant to renounce atomic energy, which before Fukushima was the source of about 30 percent of the nation's electricity, because of the difficulty of winding down its vast investment in it.

There is also strong resistance from the business community because of the extra costs associated with alternative energy and concerns that the shift would damage Japan Inc.'s competitiveness.

The business community and the government remain deeply invested in nuclear power.

But the overwhelming public opposition prevailed.

Over the summer, the government collected public comments on three possible scenarios for nuclear energy use by 2030: zero percent, 15 percent, or 20 to 25 percent.

Although experts noted that opinionated people were the most inclined to respond to the polls, about 90 percent of the some 89,000 responses chose the zero percent option.

"I think the government is still reluctant to get rid of nuclear power completely, but it was forced to listen to the public because of the unprecedented number of responses," said Hideyuki Ban, codirector of the antinuclear Citizens' Nuclear Information Center. "The people's strong voices and action pushed the government to include the word zero."

The DPJ hopes the hedged proposal will win over voters in the next Lower House election to boost its bleak prospects.

What will happen to reactors under construction?

The government plans to let three reactors in the midst of construction to be completed.

They are reactor 3 at the plant in Matsue, Shimane Prefecture, a reactor at the plant in Oma, Aomori Prefecture, and reactor 1 at the plant in Higashidori, Aomori Prefecture.

The Shimane reactor is 93.6 percent finished, the Oma unit 37.6 percent and the Higashidori reactor 9.7 percent, but work on each was halted after March 11. Earlier this month, the Oma reactor became the first to resume construction.

If the government truly aims to end nuclear power, why is the atomic fuel-recycling program continuing?

This continuation cuts to the heart of the ambiguity, experts say. The new strategy clearly states that the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel will proceed.

The recycling extracts uranium and plutonium from spent fuel for reuse as a hybrid fuel in reactors. If all the reactors are done away with, Japan will have a large plutonium stockpile sitting around with nothing to do.

"It is a complete contradiction. If Japan is going to get rid of nuclear power, it doesn't need to recycle spent fuel anymore," Ban of CNIC said.

Other experts see the continuation of recycling as a way to placate the communities that host the facilities and who now worry that their government subsidy spigot will suddenly be shut off.

This is particularly true in regard to Aomori Prefecture, where communities hosting reprocessing facilities have lashed out at what they call an abrupt about-face by the government. They stand to

lose vast state funds if the fuel cycle is terminated.

Could the no-nuclear goal be reneged on in the future?

Yes. The Cabinet failed to officially endorse the new strategy, which means that future governments won't be obliged to uphold it.

The Cabinet instead adopted some kind of a rider statement that said the government would hold discussions with regional governments and the "international community" on the new energy policy "by constantly reviewing and re-examining policies with flexibility."

The conservative Liberal Democratic Party, the largest opposition force, has already stated it will drop Noda's no-nuclear goal. The LDP was the main promoter of nuclear power during its decades-long reign in the postwar period and the prime provider of its seed funds. It is now aiming to return to power in the next Lower House election.

When that election is held, nuclear power will be one of the top issues, according to the DPJ's Seiji Maehara, minister in charge of national strategy. "I am aware that the LDP has a different opinion and I believe (nuclear power) will be one of the major issues in the next general election," he said in a recent interview with The Japan Times and other media.

"I think it is important to let the people choose for themselves," he said, reminding voters that they should keep the parties' positions in mind.

Why is the United States concerned about the new goal?

One reason is that if Japan drops nuclear power but continues to extract plutonium from fuel, it will raise proliferation fears, which Washington is strongly concerned about.

Japan was allowed to introduce commercial atomic power in line with a bilateral accord with the U.S. The accord, revised in 1988, also stipulates that the U.S. give advance consent to allow the reprocessing of spent fuel and the extraction of plutonium at the Rokkasho facility in Aomori Prefecture.

Media reports suggest that Washington pressured Tokyo into fudging the Cabinet's official endorsement of the no-nuclear goal to provide some wiggle room in the policy.

It also wants Japan to continue importing its nuclear technology in light of the decades-long ban it placed on new nuclear power plant construction after the Three Mile Island incident in 1979, said Ban of CNIC.

"The U.S. doesn't want Japan to stop using atomic energy. If Japan withdraws, America's export plans could fall through," Ban said. "Japan's new strategy could negatively affect the U.S."

How will the new policy affect Japan's vow to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent?

In 2009, then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama pledged at the U.N. General Assembly that Japan would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent from 1990 levels by 2020.

Fukushima, and the public outcry, derailed this plan, which at the time was still based on the ever-expanding nuclear power program in Japan, which it wanted to cover 50 percent of its energy needs.

In speech in October, Noda effectively retracted the 25 percent pledge.

"Our country will devote maximum power to creating an energy-saving society and expanding reusable energy." But at the same time, despite such efforts, it will be difficult to control the amount of carbon dioxide emissions that we had planned to cover through atomic energy," Noda said.

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P.S.

* October 30, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121030i1.html>