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CABINET INTERVIEW

Government OK irrelevant on nuke restarts: Maehara

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There is absolutely no need for the government to make a political decision to restart nuclear reactors after the new regulatory body has approved their safety, according to Seiji Maehara, the newly appointed national policy minister.

The government and the Nuclear Regulation Authority, the new atomic energy watchdog, are locked in an increasingly fierce struggle over who has ultimate responsibility for authorizing reactor restarts — a hot potato both sides wants to steer well clear of.

In an interview with The Japan Times and other media outlets Thursday, Maehara, who now oversees the nation's nuclear policy, stressed that the NRA is ultimately responsible for giving reactors the green light to resume operations.

This means idled units in effect would be automatically reactivated once the NRA confirms their safety and the regional utility concerned wins the consent of the host municipality and the prefectural governor.

"We made sure the NRA was set up as a completely independent entity, and for the government to hand down a separate judgement after it confirms a reactor's safety would therefore be inconsistent and illogical," Maehara said. "Once the safety of a reactor is guaranteed, it will be brought back online."

The National Policy Unit, which Maehara heads in his new post, over the summer organized public hearings nationwide to solicit opinions on the government's three scenarios for nuclear power by 2030 in Japan's electricity supply: zero, 15 percent, or 20 to 25 percent. Since the vast majority of the public called for its complete abolition, the government was left with little choice but to amend its energy policy and aim to scrap all nuclear power plants by the 2030s.

But the Cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda then shocked the nation by failing to officially endorse the new energy policy, a critical step to ensure that future governments continue to be obligated to continue pursuing the elimination of nuclear power.

Instead, the Cabinet attached it as a "reference material" to the policy it authorized, and merely adopted a sentence stating that the government would hold discussions with local governments and the international community on the



Seiji Maehara

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new energy policy, and would "flexibly implement it by conducting ongoing studies and reviews."

Maehara brushed aside concerns that the government's resolve to abolish atomic energy has weakened, stressing that the Cabinet approved the overall direction of the new energy policy, which includes the zero percent target. However, he acknowledged that the Liberal Democratic Party, which is reluctant to get rid of atomic energy altogether, could abandon efforts to eliminate it should the party come to power.

"I am aware that the LDP has different opinions and I believe that (nuclear power) will be one of the major issues in the next general election," Maehara said. "I think it is important to let the people choose for themselves."

Meanwhile, the DPJ's new nuclear energy policy has already come under attack because of several contradictions and inconsistencies, including the government's intent to continue building reactors on which work had begun before the Fukushima disaster, as well as its plan to continue selling nuclear technologies overseas.

"I understand there are many opinions over the fact that on the one hand, our country is aiming for zero reliance at home while trying to sell (such technologies) abroad on the other," said Maehara, arguing it should be left up to each country to decide whether and from whom to procure nuclear technologies. "Some countries may be interested in Japan (due to the lessons of the Fukushima crisis) and I don't think we should close our doors (to customers abroad)."

On the economy, Maehara, who was also put in charge of economic and fiscal policy, said he intends to urge the Bank of Japan to carry out "powerful" monetary easing steps. He attended a meeting of the central bank's Policy Board on Friday, an extremely rare move for a fiscal policy minister.

Having already called on the BOJ to purchase foreign bonds to stem the yen's searing appreciation, Maehara said he will encourage the bank to realize its stated target of achieving a 1 percent annual rise in the consumer price index "as early as possible."

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