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Japan's no-nuke pledge is already fraying at the edges

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THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

The government's commitment to abandon nuclear power by the 2030s is increasingly sounding like "maybe," after its new energy policy won only qualified approval at a Cabinet session on Sept. 19 and ministers left ample leeway for its future reversal.

Business circles and local governments in districts where nuclear plants are major employers criticized Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's plan to adapt a no-nuclear goal, while the United States expressed concern over the possible erosion of its ally's nuclear capability.

Now, pro-nuclear advocates are predicting abolition will not occur.

"I think we can avert it at least for the moment," said Hiromasa Yonenkura, chairman of Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), Japan's most powerful business lobby. A strong opponent of zero nuclear power, Yonenkura was speaking to reporters on Sept. 19.

On Sept. 14, the administration declared it would "mobilize every policy resource available to achieve the abolition of nuclear power plants in the 2030s." It would achieve this, it said, by strictly applying a 40-year lifetime limit to the nation's 50 reactors, and by building no new ones.

The policy, entitled "Innovative Strategy for Energy and Environment," was adopted at the government's Energy and Environment Council, a panel of Cabinet ministers. It reflected the general public's overwhelming support for the abolition of nuclear power, as voiced across Japan at venues such as public hearings.

But when the Cabinet met to approve the document Sept. 19, it did not take up the policy in its entirety. Instead, it endorsed a statement which read: "The government will promote energy and environment policy under constant examination and review, in dialogue with affected local governments and the global community, as well as seeking understanding from the general public."

If a Cabinet approves any policy or bill, that commitment is binding for it and for successive Cabinets, unless formal changes or revisions are made.

On the other hand, lack of Cabinet approval deprives a policy of a strong basis for implementation. It could become no more than a hollow promise.

Noda has already indicated he will review the new energy policy at a Sept. 18 meeting of the Council on National Strategy and Policy.

"We need a strategy with both a firm direction and the flexibility to respond to circumstances; while its base line will not waver, it will not restrict future policy excessively," Noda said.

The administration's policy to phase out nuclear power in the 2030s has met fierce opposition from local governments where nuclear facilities are located, including Aomori and Fukui prefectures.

Shutting those plants could deliver a heavy blow to administrators whose local economies have been built around the nuclear industry.

A fierce tug of war is playing out over the future of the expensive and trouble-prone Monju prototype fast breeder reactor in Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture.

For decades, Japan Atomic Energy Agency, a government-affiliated organization, has pushed to bring the Monju project online. The plant will use plutonium fuel, which is retrieved by reprocessing spent fuel from ordinary nuclear power plants.

But if Japan pulls the plug on nuclear power, it may not need the Monju reactor.

The Fukui prefectural government and Tsuruga city government reacted sharply when on Sept. 13 Seishu Makino, senior vice minister at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, proposed that Monju eventually be decommissioned. He made the remarks during a meeting with the governor of Fukui, Issei Nishikawa.

Further objection was raised by Hirofumi Hirano, Japan's education minister, who officially oversees the project.

So the administration decided it would allow Monju to remain in operation, as a research reactor.

But then the policy was watered down even further when, in the final version, the term "research reactor" disappeared, effectively leaving the current project almost intact.

"We do not intend to make any big change to the fast breeder reactor project," Hirano told local officials during his visit to Fukui Prefecture on Sept. 18.

But the government's backtracking is not limited to the Monju reactor.

There was another apparent U-turn over three incomplete reactors currently under construction.

Despite the policy's declaring "no new reactors," the industry minister, Yukio Edano, said Sept. 15 construction work on three reactors in Aomori and Shimane prefectures would continue.

Edano did, however, draw the line at approving additional reactors: on Sept. 19 he indicated that the ministry would reject nine proposed reactors that currently exist only as blueprints.

There was another flip-flop over the reactors' 40-year life span rule.

When asked if three units that have already exceeded 40 years would be decommissioned, Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura replied: "They certainly will be, in line with the three principles of the policy." He was addressing a news conference on the morning of Sept. 18.

But later that day he said it would be the nuclear regulatory commission, a new watchdog formed on Sept. 19, that decides, not the government.

Business leaders too have blasted the administration's policy to do away with nuclear power.

The heads of the nation's three largest business lobbies formed a united front of criticism, appearing in a rare joint news conference on Sept. 18.

"We object to the abolition of nuclear power from the standpoint of protecting jobs and people's livelihoods," Yonenkura said. "It is highly regrettable that our argument was comprehensively dismissed."

On Sept. 13, Yonekura called Noda to voice his opposition. On Sept. 18, he made his displeasure known by skipping a meeting of the Council on National Strategy and Policy, on which he sits as a representative of the private sector.

In their joint news conference on Sept. 18, Yasuchika Hasegawa, chairman of Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives), stressed Japan's global contribution through nuclear technology.

"Japan has a role in the international community, which is to help develop safe and efficient nuclear tools with its cutting-edge technology," Hasegawa said.

The third participant at the news conference was Tadashi Okamura, chairman of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The administration's new energy policy was drawn up in response to overwhelming calls for an end to nuclear power, heard during public hearings and in comments delivered directly to the government.

But ministers began discussing in detail only this month how to achieve that goal while drawing expected fire from pro-nuclear advocates.

They adopted increasingly vague terms for the policy in an attempt to blunt a backlash from businesses, local officials and the United States.

The Cabinet is expected this month to compile Japan's Basic Energy Plan in line with the new energy policy.

That plan will be finalized in line with Japan's pre-existing basic law on energy policy and will become binding for the general public, utilities and local governments.

But it remains to be seen if the Basic Energy Plan will reflect the contents of the new policy, the Innovative Strategy for Energy and Environment.

The plan is being debated by members of an industry ministry advisory panel. They met Sept. 18, but were divided.

Jitsuro Terashima, president of the Japan Research Institute, raised doubts about the feasibility of abolishing nuclear power.

"Is it possible to have realistic developments on the basis of this policy?" he said.

A Tsuruga city official referred to the U-turns already apparent and declared bluntly: "This policy is merely for the current administration. It can be reviewed."

Meanwhile, the nation's nuclear fuel recycling program is facing further difficulties.

Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. announced on Sept. 19 that the completion of a plant reprocessing spent nuclear fuel in Rokkasho village in Aomori Prefecture would be delayed by a year, to October 2013.

That plant is central to Japan's nuclear fuel recycling program.

When the company sought government backing for the project in 1989, its completion date was projected as 1997. But a string of troubles postponed its completion, and the latest delay marked the 19th postponement. Construction costs have ballooned to 2.19 trillion yen (\$28.11 billion), about three times the initial estimate.

The company said construction work was disrupted by last year's earthquake and tsunami, but it also cited difficulties at a furnace that mixes high-level radioactive with glass.

The plant is designed to retrieve plutonium and other materials from spent nuclear fuel.

The government discussed scrapping the recycling program after the nuclear accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in March 2011. But, like Monju, the project survived into the new policy.

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