Critics Say Proposed Guidelines for Japan’s Nuclear Industry Will Hinder Business

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TOKYO — Proposed new safety guidelines for Japan’s nuclear industry that could keep reactors shuttered for years for emergency upgrades have set off intense political maneuvering by those who say the regulations will cripple business just as hopes were rising for economic relief.

The relatively stiff requirements by a panel that included nuclear power supporters appeared to take Japan’s nuclear industry and its backers in government by surprise, and could pose a challenge to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe just weeks into his term.

Mr. Abe has made it clear that he wanted to restart Japan’s scores of idled reactors — all but two of which remain offline in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima plant disaster — and has even said that he wanted to build new ones. But he and his Liberal Democratic Party, the architect of Japan’s nuclear industry, already faced significant opposition among a population that was traumatized by the accident that spread radioactive materials over a wide swath of the country’s northeast.

Although many opponents of an immediate restart say they accept that the plants are needed for the sake of the economy, they do not want the plants turned back on until they are better regulated than before.

While nuclear industry supporters suggested the proposed new rules were too strict antinuclear activists worried that the panel could waive the toughest rules. Though plants would need to meet the guidelines before reactor restarts were cleared, the p has left open the possibility that some standards could be suspended to allow a limited number of plants to go back online.

The crisis at the Fukushima plant, which led to meltdowns in three reactors, started after a 9.0 magnitude earthquake caused a tsunami that swept through the plant, knocking out the electrical power needed to run crucial cooling systems.

The proposed guidelines require a secondary command center away from the reactor buildings so that workers can control emergency cooling systems and vents even if they are forced to pull back from the heart of the plant during an emergency. They also call for power companies to prepare for worse tsunamis than they had previously planned for, which would force at least some oceanside plants to raise sea walls, a costly endeavor.

The rules would also ban power companies from building or operating reactors on top of active faults, but continuing contentious discussions over what an “active” fault consists of might allow the government to avoid closing plants constructed on faults for good.

Many of the proposed regulations bring Japan in line with standards in the United States.
The new guidelines are the latest step in Japan's struggle to chart its energy future after the disaster. Previous governments led by the Democratic Party had given vague promises to phase out nuclear power as polls indicated that many feared nuclear power. Many also remain worried that the collusive ties between government and the industry, which had left the country vulnerable to disaster, could not be broken.

But Mr. Abe has argued that keeping the reactors idle would hinder a recovery he is trying to jump-start with promises to tackle deflation that have already led to a weakening in the yen welcomed by struggling exporters.

Nuclear energy had provided 30 percent of the nation's electricity needs before the disaster. With virtually all of its reactors offline, Japan has had to import more fossil fuels, driving resource-poor Japan to a record annual trade deficit last year. Before the accident, it consistently posted large trade surpluses.

Still, Mr. Abe's ability to sway the panel — or try to overrule it — might be limited. The regulatory body has been given significant autonomy, and is able to take a wide range of actions without government approval, partly as a result of maneuvering by Mr. Abe's own party when it was out of power. Fearing the anti-nuclear agenda of some in the then-ruling Democratic Party, the Liberal Democrats had demanded that the body be insulated from political pressure.

But supporters of Japan's nuclear industry appeared to be starting a campaign Friday to ensure that the rules did not go into effect as they were.

"If we don't have a stable energy supply, how are businesses supposed to invest and help Japan grow?" Hiromasa Yonekura, chairman of the Japan Business Federation, told reporters Friday.

Japan's 10 nuclear operators, including Tokyo Electric Power, the operator of the ravaged Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, could pay a total of one trillion yen to make the proposed changes at their plants, the Nikkei business daily reported Friday.

The five-member panel is expected to finalize the rules in July after a public hearing process.

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