

Western allies concerned about Japan's no-nuke energy policy

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As Japan prepares to abandon its dependence on nuclear energy, government officials are scrambling to address concerns from Western nations over how that shift would impact them.

The interconnected nature of the nuclear energy industry has led the United States, Britain and France in recent days to express their concerns to government officials. Those nations are closely linked to Japan in both the construction of nuclear power plants and the recycling of nuclear fuel.

Senior government officials flew to the United States on Sept. 12 to explain what the change would mean over the policy objective being mulled by the Noda administration to halt operations of all nuclear power plants by the 2030s.

Akihisa Nagashima, one of Noda's special advisers, and Hiroshi Ogushi, a Cabinet Office parliamentary secretary, were dispatched to Washington to meet with officials at the White House, State Department and Energy Department.

According to a high-ranking government source, U.S. officials voiced concerns over a wide range of topics, including national security and the nuclear energy industry. Questions raised during the discussion included the handling of the plutonium produced through the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel, Japan's involvement and future role in the nuclear nonproliferation structure and the effects on fostering technology and other sectors related to nuclear energy.

The Japanese officials explained that the nuclear-free objective was a long-term one and that Japan would deal flexibly with the various problems that may emerge during its move away from nuclear energy.

Also on Sept. 12, Seiji Maehara, the policy chief of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan who was on his own visit to the United States, met with Daniel Poneman, the deputy secretary of energy. Poneman expressed concerns about the grave effects the change in Japanese energy policy would have on the United States.

On Sept. 13, French Ambassador Christian Masset visited Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura. France reprocesses spent nuclear fuel for Japan, and Masset asked for reassurances that Japan would take over the highly radioactive waste that emerges from the reprocessing.

Aomori Prefecture, where a reprocessing plant for the reuse of nuclear fuel is under construction in Rokkasho, has indicated it would reject taking on that radioactive waste should the program to reprocess spent fuel end.

The British ambassador made a similar request of Fujimura on Sept. 11.

Fujimura said he told the ambassadors the matter would be handled in a manner to avoid damaging the relationship of trust with

those nations.

Japan and the United States are also linked by an agreement on nuclear energy that allows Japan to enrich uranium in order to use it as a fuel in nuclear plants and to extract plutonium after reprocessing spent nuclear fuel.

The United States has used that agreement to prevent Japan from developing nuclear weapons and also to utilize Japan's nuclear energy technology.

Following the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in 1979, the United States stopped construction of new nuclear reactors. As a result, U.S. manufacturers of nuclear plants lost both workers and technological skills, and Japan has been providing support in this area to some U.S. companies. In 2006, Toshiba Corp. acquired Westinghouse Co., and the following year, Hitachi Ltd. and General Electric Co. merged their nuclear energy operations.

The increasingly likely policy decision to move away from nuclear energy, however, could leave Japanese companies in the sector facing a similar fate as U.S. companies in the past.

And while Japanese, U.S. and French nuclear plant manufacturers are currently at the forefront of technology, a no-nuclear policy in Japan could leave the door open for China to become a competitive threat.

With 14 nuclear reactors already operating, China has plans to increase the number to 70. If it follows through on these plans, China would not only accumulate a large volume of plutonium, but could emerge as a leader in the global nuclear energy field.

The growing presence of China was noted in an August report on the Japan-U.S. alliance compiled by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, which said in part, "As China rises among the ranks of nuclear powers, it will become crucial for allies like Japan and South Korea--both important actors in the global market--to ensure proper safeguards, nonproliferation practices, and high standards of transparency in the production of nuclear energy."

Some companies would be more immediately affected by Japan's decision to move away from nuclear energy.

Areva SA of France handles the reprocessing of spent fuel from Japan's nuclear plants, and a reduction in the number of nuclear plants in operation would directly affect the company's profits.

The Noda administration has tried to placate the concerns in this area from its Western allies by saying that operations at nuclear plants would be resumed once safety was confirmed and its nuclear fuel recycling program would be maintained.

However, contradictions will eventually emerge since there would be no need for recycling programs if Japan no longer has any nuclear plants in operation.

(This article was written by Akira Minami, Takashi Oshima, Hiroshi Takata and Ikki Yamakawa.)

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