

# Japan's Nuclear Energy Policy: Economic Pressures and Propaganda Tactics

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As the only victims of the atomic bomb to date, the Japanese people have remained fearful and skeptical of developments relating to nuclear science. During World War II, the United States bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki with newly developed nuclear weapons, causing unimaginable destruction. It not only resulted in the instant death of over 100,000 civilians, but also caused innumerable fatalities due to radiation sickness and cancer.<sup>1</sup> Despite the public's memory of these devastating events, the government has actively pursued the use of nuclear energy, citing energy security and greenhouse gas reduction as primary objectives. At the beginning of 2011, nuclear power represented 30% of Japan's energy consumption, and the government had endorsed plans to increase this share to at least 40% by 2017.<sup>2</sup> The landscape drastically shifted after March 11, 2011, when the 9.0 magnitude Tōhoku earthquake set off a powerful tsunami and started a disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The accident was later rated Level 7 on the International Nuclear Event Scale, putting it on par with the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986.<sup>3</sup> As a result of rising public anger and impassioned demonstrations, almost all nuclear power plants have been idled, and the government has been forced to reconsider its nuclear energy policy.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, due to the country's economic pressures and historical trend of successful propaganda, the Japanese government will likely continue to promote nuclear energy in spite of the objections of the people.

## Current Crisis

There are different interpretations of Japan's nuclear energy policy path. One position favors the idea that state propaganda will overwhelm public opposition and opposes the view that anti-nuclear

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sentiments will lead to a policy change. Morris Low, in “Accelerators and Politics in Postwar Japan,” emphasizes the role of the Japanese government in overcoming citizen dissent. He highlights the tensions between physicists, citizens, and the government during the period immediately following WWII, illustrating the challenge of establishing atomic research in a newly democratic Japan. Through examples, Low shows how the voices of the local citizens were ultimately ignored and the government managed to push ahead with nuclear research.<sup>5</sup> The opposite position is represented in “Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy: From Top-Down Directives to Bottom-Up Activism.” In this piece, Daniel Aldrich notes that although the Japanese have reluctantly acquiesced to the adoption and expansion of nuclear energy in the past, public support has dwindled significantly over the last two decades with the revelations of previously covered-up nuclear incidents. Aldrich contends that the 2011 Fukushima catastrophe was the final straw, igniting the fury of Japanese citizens who have long opposed nuclear power and who will no longer accept a government that promotes this risky form of energy.<sup>6</sup>

The latter position seems more appealing when the nuclear issue is viewed in conjunction with the ideals of democracy. Aldrich’s position implies a belief that the commoners will be successful in influencing the government through grassroots activism and that the public’s unfavorable view of nuclear energy will ultimately prevail. The reasoning is that since the Japanese have a functioning democracy in which the people elect their representatives, citizens can either pressure politicians to adopt anti-nuclear policies or simply vote legislators who oppose nuclear power into office. Although logically sound, this argument fails to understand the importance of two main points behind Japan’s energy policy, namely energy security and the government’s historical successes in manipulating public opinion.

### Energy Security

Japan’s limited natural resources have posed a serious problem for the country’s growing economy. The country imports 84% of its primary energy requirements, thus making it extremely dependent on other

countries, especially those in the Middle East. This vulnerability quickly surfaced during the oil crisis of 1973-1974 as a severe threat to Japan's energy security. At that time, Japan was dependent on oil for 66% of the electricity produced.<sup>7</sup> With the price per barrel soaring from three to twelve dollars and the availability of oil plummeting, the government was forced to make the issue a top priority. Japanese officials were determined to achieve self-sufficiency and to protect critical industries. To ensure energy reliability and affordability, the government embraced the two alternatives of the time, hydroelectric dams and nuclear power plants.<sup>8</sup> The fear of oil dependence led to the drastic increase of and eventual reliance on nuclear energy.

This dilemma continues to the present day. Now that Japan produces 30% of its electricity from nuclear plants, the termination of this energy source would have serious economic consequences. Yoshito Sengoky, a leading voice in the Democratic Party of Japan, warned that, "We must think ahead to the impact on Japan's economy and people's lives if all nuclear reactors are stopped. Japan could, in some sense, be committing mass [economic] suicide."<sup>9</sup> Beside the harmful environmental effects of returning to fossil fuels, the cost of oil imports is estimated to be \$40 billion a year.<sup>10</sup> Business analysts also fear a loss of competitiveness and cite power supply uncertainty as a major factor in the relocations of corporations.<sup>11</sup> With the Japanese economy at risk, the government cannot afford to and will not abandon nuclear power.

### **Historical Trend of Successful Propaganda**

Backtracking to 1954, the Lucky Dragon incident was one of the first obstacles to Japan's nuclear aspirations. It prompted the government to start public relations work, promoting nuclear research and introducing nuclear power despite the concerns of local residents. In March, twenty-three fishermen became contaminated while sailing through the fallout of a U.S. hydrogen bomb test that occurred on the first of the month. As a result of the event, 30 million Japanese, or one third of the population, signed a petition demanding the banning of hydrogen bombs. Although the petition was explicitly referring to weapons, nuclear power was also viewed in a very unfavorable light.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the government issued a proposal for the Institute of Nuclear Study (INS). Low details that the INS faced stiff opposition from Tanashi, Tokyo residents. The citizens were fearful of the proposed nuclear research center, actively protesting the INS and even passing a city council resolution against the establishment of the organization. The physicists affiliated with the project attempted to convince the public by assuring the residents that the INS was intended for peaceful purposes. However, the townspeople remained steadfast in their opposition. In the end, the government ignored these objections and the facility opened in July 1955.<sup>13</sup> The bold move to abandon the ongoing talks with the local residents and to go ahead with construction reflected the government's tendencies to promote nuclear power at all costs.

By 1963, the country had its first nuclear power plant.<sup>14</sup> As Aldrich argues, "the Japanese government developed an extensive array of policy instruments and soft social control techniques designed to bring public opinion in line with national energy goals."<sup>15</sup> In addition to aiding companies such as the Tokyo Electric Power Company financially and logistically, officials carefully avoided building nuclear plants in hostile communities. The central government even provided compensation or job opportunities to some fishermen so that they would not object. In addition, agencies introduced science curricula in schools and created Nuclear Power Day; they set up events to benefit fishermen and farmers, two groups that have been historically anxious about nuclear developments. Money has also been funneled to communities willing to host a nuclear power plant.<sup>16</sup> These undemocratic methods of silencing dissent highlight the extent to which the Japanese government is willing to pursue nuclear energy.

## Conclusion

Even though the March 2011 disaster led to unprecedented concern and anger from Japanese citizens, recent developments demonstrate that Japan is already reverting to its historical trend. Despite staggering 2013 poll numbers showing that 73% of the people want to decrease or abolish nuclear energy, and despite the Energy & Environmental

Council's recommendation to phase-out nuclear reactors, the freshly elected Liberal Democratic Party has once again spoken out in favor of restarting reactors.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the pro-nuclear political party won a landslide victory in 2012, winning 294 out of 480 seats in the lower house of parliament.<sup>18</sup> The negative public opinion surrounding the Fukushima catastrophe failed to affect Japan's nuclear energy policy.

Japan has persistently shown that it will continue using nuclear power due to the significance of energy security and due to its capability to manipulate public opinion. Although the meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi complex led to unparalleled levels of grassroots activism and concern, the government will, after immense public relations work, resume the necessary production of nuclear energy. ●

### Notes

1. Alonzo L. Hamby, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," in *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, accessed May 6, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/712569/Trumans-decision-to-use-the-bomb>.
2. "Nuclear Power in Japan," World Nuclear Association, last modified April 17, 2013, accessed May 6, 2013, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-G-N/Japan/#.UYb2N5VLAzQ>.
3. Hamby, "The decision to use the atomic," in *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.
4. Daniel P. Aldrich, "Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy: From Top-Down Directives to Bottom-Up Activism," *Asia Pacific Issues*, no. 103 (January 2012): 6-7, accessed May 6, 2013, <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/api103.pdf>.
5. Morris F. Low, "Accelerators and Politics in Postwar Japan," *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences* 36, no. 2 (March 2006): 286-9, accessed May 6, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hsp.2006.36.2.275>.

6. Aldrich, "Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy," 1.
7. "Nuclear Power in Japan," World Nuclear Association.
8. Aldrich, "Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy," 2-3.
9. "Germany and Japan Rethink Nuclear Policies," Nuclear Energy Institute, last modified 2012, accessed May 6, 2013, <http://www.nei.org/resourcesandstats/publicationsandmedia/insight/Summer-2012/germany-and-japan-rethink-nuclear-policies>.
10. "Nuclear Power in Japan," World Nuclear Association.
11. Aldrich, "Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy," 7.
12. Ibid., 2.
13. Low, "Accelerators and Politics in Postwar Japan," 286-9.
14. "Nuclear Power in Japan," World Nuclear Association.
15. Aldrich, "Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy," 3.
16. Ibid., 3-5.
17. "Nuclear Power in Japan," World Nuclear Association.
18. Malcolm Foster, "Japan Elections 2012: LDP Wins Majority In Parliamentary Elections," The Huffington Post, last modified December 16, 2012, accessed May 6, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/16/japan-elections-2012-ldp-wins\\_n\\_2310527.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/16/japan-elections-2012-ldp-wins_n_2310527.html).

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