



Centre for Air Power Studies

THE JAPANESE NUCLEAR RESURRECTION

*Dr. Sitakanta Mishra,
Research Fellow, CAPS*

Amidst widespread speculation on the future of Japanese nuclear industry ever since 2011 Fukushima disaster, the recent decision by authorities of Kyushu island to restart two reactors in Sendai Nuclear Plant (Kagoshima Prefecture) marks a “milestone”. This has ended “the confusion over who, ultimately, must make the decision about whether to turn reactors back on.”¹

At the outset, it “sets a precedent that other local authorities can point to when they weigh the pros and cons of permitting utilities to power up nuclear facilities in their districts.”² Secondly, this would also put to rest the debate whether nuclear energy in Japan “still have exciting possibilities for growth, or are its best days behind”.³ Thirdly, it corroborates the fact that nuclear industry has had highs and lows, and the nuclear story varies greatly from country to country. Lastly, though several countries in Europe, Middle East, South America are continuing with new projects, Asia – including Japan – will lead the global nuclear energy drive.

The affirmative vote by Japanese local authorities does not mean that the reactors will go back online immediately. While some governmental authorities seem to be in line with the Sendai restart, the tussle over exactly how many municipalities and prefectures should be involved in the process of allowing restart is still intense. Meanwhile, Japan’s plans to build new reactors will be scaled down and consumption of nuclear power will be limited over the next few decades. There will remain good deal of reluctance among the public for new projects as well as restarting the old reactors. Therefore, Japan is “likely to

continue to struggle to convince” its citizens of the benefits of restarting the reactors which would be “a long, uphill battle” for the national government.⁴

Currently, the Japanese electric utilities are seeking safety certifications for around 20 out of the 48 old operable reactors. The rest are too old to upgrade, or are too close to the disaster zone.⁵ Japan’s cabinet is scheduled to vote in March next year on whether to accept the Basic Energy Plan that stipulated stringent safety certifications parameters and guidelines set by the independent nuclear regulator. Even, Tepco is considering approaching US companies “to verify safety standards of its nuclear reactors”.⁶ Many companies and advisors from US, France, and Russia are already involved in some of the Fukushima cleanup activities. Greater public scrutiny, stringent safety-security provisions, swiping reforms and international cooperation in all aspects of nuclear industry would enhance Japanese confidence and faith on atomic energy.

ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR

PAKISTAN’S NAVAL NUCLEAR BRINKMANSHIP

FROM ARMS IMPORTER TO ARMS EXPORTER: PARADIGM SHIFT

NUCLEAR MATERIAL SEIZURE BY ISIL – A WAKEUP CALL

CARRYING FORWARD UPA’S NUCLEAR SPELL

IS NUCLEAR RENAISSANCE BACK ON TRACK?

PRAHAR: A CONVENTIONAL REJOINDER

It is worth recalling the words of Kiyoshi Kurokawa, the Chairman of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission, on the Fukushima nuclear accident: “What must be admitted – very painfully – is that this was a disaster ‘Made in Japan.’ Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to ‘sticking with the program’; our groupism; and our insularity ... nuclear power became an unstoppable force, immune to scrutiny by civil society. Its regulation was entrusted to the same government bureaucracy responsible for its promotion.”⁷ Given this confession, and

the current pockets of domestic disposition to revive nuclear industry, one has to ponder over to what extent these trends have been arrested, and what organizational changes are being brought in.

Undoubtedly, tougher safety rules and operating procedures have been designed and prescribed by the Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) – the new nuclear watchdog. Nuclear plant emergency drills are simulated in intervals involving thousands of residents and government officials, all the way up to Prime Minister.⁸ However, critics view that the nuclear regulator has “focused heavily on the operational safety” of plants only. They alleged that “in their rush to get the reactors back online, the authorities have not invested enough on readying surrounding communities” to deal with future disaster. Evacuation plans are “inadequate”, since these demand devolution of power to local authorities as the prime minister only can give an evacuation order at present. Some support the idea of installation of “nuclear bunkers in local houses”.⁹

The challenge to resurrect Japanese nuclear programme, and the scope for safety upgrade, is enormous. Japan seems determined not to overlook any aspect of nuclear safety before it fully bounces back on the track. Also, in very few countries have the anti-nuclear activists succeeded; it is expected that they will not prevail in Japan either. What matters most is how effectively the corrective safety-security measures are implemented while making citizens the stakeholders in every aspect of the programme to win back public confidence.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ Jonathan Soble, “Regional Politicians Approve Restart of Nuclear Plant in South Japan”, *The New York Times*, November 07, 2014.

² Justin McCurry, “Japan Edges Back Towards Nuclear Power with Vote to Restart Reactors”, *The Guardian*, October 28, 2014.

³ Miles A. Pomper, “New Growth for Nuclear Energy Depends on Asia”, *World Politics Review*, October 16, 2014.

⁴ Clint Richards, "Local Rifts on Display in Japan's Nuclear Restart", <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/local-rifts-on-display-in-japans-nuclear-restart/>, November 05, 2014.

⁵ Soble, n. 1.

⁶ Yuriy Humber, "Tepco Considers U.S. Help to Verify Nuclear Plant Safety", *Bloomberg Businessweek*, November 01, 2014.

⁷ Kiyoshi Kurokawa, "The National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission," 2012, http://ieer.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Fukushima_NAIIC_report_lo_res3.pdf

⁸ "Japan Conducts Nuclear Plant Stress Test", http://nuclearstreet.com/nuclear_power_industry_news/b/nuclear_power_news/archive/2014/11/04/japan-conducts-nuclear-plant-stress-test-110401.aspx#.VGjMujR_vZ0, November, 04 2014.

⁹ "The Country Lurches towards a Nuclear Comeback", *The Economist*, November 03, 2014.

-----XXX-----