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A good deal of what is said here about Japan and its nuclear village is also true for France and probably for other countries too. (RSDN)

Japan's Well-Placed Nuclear Power Advocates Swat Away Opponents

By Douglas Birch, R. Jeffrey Smith and Jake Adelstein, Center for Public Integrity

TOKYO — When Taro Kono was growing up as the son of a major Japanese political party leader, he had what he calls a “fever for the atom.” Like many of his countrymen, he regarded nuclear power plants as his country’s ticket to postwar prosperity, a modern, economical way to meet huge energy needs on an island with few natural resources.

Over the next five decades, pro-nuclear sentiment led Japan to build the world’s third largest fleet of nuclear reactors. Its officials spent more than two decades and \$22 billion building a factory to create plutonium-based nuclear reactor fuel, the largest ever to be subject to international monitoring. The facility is slated for completion in October at Rokkasho on Japan’s northeast coast, kicking off a new phase in the country’s long-term plan to increase energy independence.

By the time Kono was elected to the parliament, known as the Diet, at the age of 33 in 1996, however, he had become a skeptic about the Rokkasho plant. After interrogating scientists and meeting with critics, he concluded that a vast array of new reactors fueled by its plutonium faced

huge technical challenges, posed a major proliferation risk, and probably would not reap the financial benefits claimed by its backers. He told the American ambassador at an embassy dinner in 2008 that its high costs were improperly kept hidden from the public.

But Kono's campaign in Japan against the plant has now been systematically squashed, in what he and his allies depict as a telling illustration of the powerful political forces — cronyism, influence-buying and a stifling of dissenting voices — that have kept the nuclear industry and its backers in the utilities here going strong.

By all accounts, the Japanese nuclear industry's sway and its governmental support remain high, even in the face of technical glitches, huge cost overruns, and accidents like the meltdowns of three reactors at Fukushima three years ago this week — which led to the abrupt closure of all its remaining reactors.

The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who leads Kono's party, announced in February its support for restarting some reactors and possibly building new ones, designed specifically to burn plutonium-based fuel.

Abe did so with apparent confidence that he has the enduring support — if not of the public — of the so-called “nuclear power village,” a tightly-woven network of regulators, utility industry executives, engineers, labor leaders and local politicians who have become dependent on nuclear power for jobs, income, and prestige.

Kono, a fluent English-speaker who received his undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, said in an interview that he has been talking about nuclear power “for the last 16 to 17 years,” but “no one really paid attention, right ?”

Kono was unable to defeat the plutonium fuel program, he said, because its powerful constituency includes not only members of the ruling party, but bureaucrats, media leaders, bankers and academics. The louder he complained, the more these elites turned their backs on him. Just 60 legislators out of 722 in the parliament's lower and upper chambers have joined the anti-nuclear caucus he helped organize.

Industry officials contend that Rokkasho's completion makes sound fiscal sense. Yoshihiko Kawai, president of Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., the consortium of 85 utilities and other companies that owns the plant, has argued that making new plutonium-based fuels from old reactor fuel — according to the Rokkasho plan — was thrifty, not wasteful. “By directly disposing of spent fuels, we would be just throwing this energy resource away,” he told Plutonium Magazine in 2012.

A broadside over dinner

On a warm, cloudless fall evening in 2008, Kono brought his strong views about the corrupting influence of the “nuclear village” to a dinner at the walled residence of U.S. ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer, a longtime friend and former business partner of President George W. Bush.

Schieffer was eager to take the measure of a rising politician who opposed Bush's plan for wider use of plutonium-based nuclear fuels around the globe, under a program known as Global Nuclear Energy Partnership that envisioned a large role for the Rokkasho plant.

Seated in the small dining room of the residence where Douglas MacArthur met Emperor Hirohito in 1945, Kono attempted to sketch out the institutional reasons why Japan's bureaucrats and its utilities remained wedded to what he considered an outdated nuclear policy. A [confidential embassy summary](#) of the unusual conversation, full of criticism by Kono of his country's policies, was published by Wikileaks in 2011.

Kono said junior officials in the government, who saw plutonium fuels as a costly technological dead end, were trapped by policies they had inherited from more senior lawmakers whom Japanese culture did not permit them to challenge. He complained that under Japanese parliamentary customs, he could not hire or fire committee staff but often had to rely on bureaucrats loaned from government agencies, all with a vested interest in promoting nuclear power. Any questions he asked were quickly passed back to those agencies.

A desire for the atom

Japan's appetite for nuclear power seems quixotic for a nation devastated by its dark underside : the plutonium- and uranium-fueled weapons developed by American scientists. **But one lesson its leaders took from the explosions over Nagasaki and Hiroshima was that they should master the technology that defeated them.**

"I saw the mushroom cloud from my naval operation base in Takamatsu," a young sailor named Yasuhiro Nakasone recalled in his autobiography. Nakasone, who would become Japan's top science official and then its prime minister from 1982 to 1987, said he concluded that if Japan didn't use the atom for peaceful purposes, it would "forever be a fourth-rate nation."

That impulse was nurtured, carefully and secretly, by Washington. A [1954 cable](#) to the director of the CIA — declassified only eight years ago — called for an "atomic peace mission" to Japan by U.S. nuclear scientists and reactor-company officials to overcome prevailing anti-nuclear sentiment and help "revive the hopes of the deflation-oppressed Japanese in reconstructing their economy."

To carry out what the cable described as "an enlightenment propaganda program," the agency in particular enlisted the assistance of Matsutaro Shoriki, a former head of the Tokyo police commission in the 1920s who had gone on to become a prominent publisher and broadcaster. The Yomiuri Shimbun, his newspaper, enthusiastically promoted nuclear power and Shoriki himself helped found Japan's Atomic Industrial Forum, a tight alliance of companies and utilities. He died in 1969.

Beginning in 1966, Japan started building about one reactor a year. From the start, however, Japan planned to use uranium-fueled light-water reactors — the technology in predominant use around the globe — only until it had created a new energy system based on advanced, breeder reactors, so named because they can both consume and produce plutonium in what in principle could be an endless cycle, almost like perpetual-motion machines.

Uranium was initially — and mistakenly — thought to be rare. And breeders, initially predicted to be less costly than conventional reactors, have proven expensive to build, difficult to operate, and hard to secure, provoking France, Britain, and the United States to cut back or close their breeder programs several decades ago.

As a young man, Kono read in his "manga" comic books that breeder reactors were ideal for Japan, because they could provide the country with energy for thousands of years "without having to burn oil," he wrote in his recent book on the Fukushima disaster. The major Japanese utilities all supported this claim, and helped spread that **word through advertising expenditures that totaled \$27.6 billion over the past four decades, according to a 2013 investigation by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper**, the Center's partner in this examination of Rokkasho.

Construction of the Rokkasho plant began in 1993 and was initially supposed to be finished by 1997, but technical setbacks and construction problems forced a delay of nearly two decades. Paul Dickman, a senior policy fellow at Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois, the center of U.S. breeder reactor research, said Rokkasho is "a great facility." But he also said it was a

“construction project that’s gone out of control,” because Japan chose to modify an existing French design for such plants, rather than simply copying it.

A dissenting view is suppressed

Throughout Rokkasho’s construction, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has been a bastion of pro-nuclear boosterism. But four officials in its economic and industrial policy bureau dared to challenge orthodoxy in 2004, when they prepared a 26-page Powerpoint entitled “The Unstoppable Nuclear Fuel Cycle” that called the planned plutonium-based nuclear program outdated and its promoters corrupt.

The presentation, obtained by the Center for Public Integrity, said nuclear policymaking was controlled by “those involved with and interested in the nuclear power industry.” It noted that four of the Atomic Energy Commission’s five members had a professional or financial stake in the industry, presaging a widespread criticism of the organization in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster.

The presentation also predicted that building, operating, and decommissioning the Rokkasho plant would cost almost \$190 billion, and warned that the practicality of building special reactors to burn the fuel it would make “has yet to be proven.” In a rush to embrace plutonium recycling, it said, Japan’s political leaders had “ignored the lack of conclusive research” and failed to acknowledge technical criticisms.

Although the authors urged that their report be published to encourage a public debate, it was instead suppressed, and they were all swiftly purged from the policy bureau, according to a source with direct information about METI’s response. The Mainichi Shimbun newspaper finally disclosed the report’s existence in 2012.

Officials with METI declined the Center for Public Integrity’s request for an interview.

The AEC meanwhile disregarded the policy bureau’s advice, and approved initial testing of the Rokkasho plant in 2006, which contaminated its pipes and equipment with highly radioactive dust, solvents, and other wastes. That ended any hopes of simply mothballing the plant. Any future decommissioning will take decades and cost \$16 billion, according to AEC estimates.

Members of the Liberal Democratic Party, which has ruled Japan since 1955 except for a year in the 1990s and for a three-year period ending in 2012, have been rewarded for their pro-nuclear stance with campaign donations from the 10 giant electrical utilities that control around 96 percent of the nation’s power supply.

The largest of these, the Tokyo Electric Power Co., or TEPCO, formally ended its direct corporate donations in 1974. But it systematically encouraged “voluntary” donations by company executives and managers to a fund-raising entity created by the ruling party, according to a 2011 investigation by Asahi. At least 448 Tepco executives donated roughly \$777,000 in total to the entity between 1995 and 2009, according to campaign finance documents obtained by Asahi and shared with the Center.

A TEPCO spokesman told Asahi that the donations were “based on the judgment of the individual and the company is not involved. We do not encourage such donations.” But Tepco executives, in interviews with Asahi reporters, said the company repeatedly stipulated how much they should donate — roughly \$3,900 for top executives, \$3,300 for executive vice presidents, and \$1,700 for managing directors, the newspaper said.

Heaven-sent officials

Tepco’s influence has also been enhanced by its enthusiastic participation in revolving

door-employment practices similar to those involving bureaucrats and companies in Washington, D.C.

A METI report in 2011, prepared at the insistence of nuclear opponents in Japan's tiny Communist Party, said for example that between 1960 and 2011, Tepco hired 68 high-level government officials. From 1980 to late 2011, the report said, four former top-level bureaucrats from METI's own Agency for Natural Resources and Energy became vice presidents at other electric utilities. The practice is known here by the amusing term, *amakudari*, for appointees who "descended from heaven."

Tepco officials also regularly move into key regulatory positions, part of a migration known as *ama-agari*, or "ascent to heaven" that has involved dozens of top utility officials. More than 100 such utility executives between 2001 and 2011 were able to keep drawing an industry paycheck while also working part-time for the government, a practice that is legal here, according to a former member of the Japanese Diet Lower House Economy and Industry Committee, who spoke on background. An official working in the Nuclear Regulation Authority's research division, in an interview, said on condition of anonymity that the *ama-agari* system is "like having cops and thieves working in the same police station."

Perhaps the most significant instance of *ama-agari* was the Liberal Democratic Party's appointment in 1998 of Tokio Kano, a longtime TEPCO executive, as chairman of the parliamentary committee that oversees METI and as the parliamentary secretary of science and technology. Both are posts crucial to the nuclear energy industry, and Kano used them to advance legislation enabling plutonium-based fuel to be burned in some standard reactors — not just breeders. He also pushed through a law requiring that all spent nuclear fuel be sent to Rokkasho or similar Japanese plants.

Taro Kono, the industry critic, charged that Kano "acted like the secretary general of whatever committee had anything to do with energy and electricity." Kono says that when he himself raised objections to nuclear policies during committee meetings, Kano would say "well, there's a strange voice in this room, but we kind of got unanimous consent" and then proceed.

When Kano retired from the parliament in 2011, he returned to TEPCO — where he had kept an office throughout his work writing legislation — as a special adviser.

Kano declined the Center's request for an interview. But he told Asahi in 2011 he remains convinced that nuclear power is sensible. "Reactors were built because local residents strongly desired them, and it's a fact they generated employment and income," he said. "Some researchers say that low-dose radiation is good for your health. It's a persuasive argument."

Kano separately [told The New York Times](#) that year it was "disgusting" that his critics considered him a TEPCO "errand boy" merely because he had the business community's support.

Funds and wastes cement Rokkasho's role

The Aomori region where the Rokkasho plant is located, with a windswept coastline and harsh climate, ranks near the bottom of the nation's 47 prefectures, or statelets, in per capita income. "You can't grow much," says Taro Kono, the anti-nuclear activist lawmaker, who said he understands the plant's local appeal. "It's a tough place to live."

In the 1980s, the central government tried and failed to stimulate Aomori's economy with sugar beet farming and a tank farm for petroleum reserves, both of which faltered. So the nuclear plant's construction, which started in 1993, turned out to be a vital source of jobs, taxes, and even tourism — contributing around 88 percent of the village's total tax revenue in 2012, according to Aomori Prefecture officials. A Japanese study last year said it had boosted per capita income levels by 62 percent.

Moreover, to smooth the way for the plant, the central government pays the village — which has a population of just 12,000 — \$25.9 million in grants yearly under a special nuclear subsidy program created in Tokyo to promote the siting of nuclear energy facilities all over the country. **The grants have amounted to more than \$2,300 annually for every man woman and child in the village**, according to prefecture officials. The village's Chamber of Commerce has reported that roughly 70 percent of the businesses there are now involved with or dependent upon the nuclear industry.

Of course, the downside of the program for local citizens is that Rokkasho has since become a storage site for 3,000 tons of highly radioactive spent fuel from commercial power plants, waiting to be processed into new plutonium. To win the right to do this, **Japan's electric power monopolies 16 years ago pledged that the vast bulk of that spent fuel would be recycled as fuel — or it would be sent back.**

But doing so would swamp spent-fuel pools at reactor sites that are already close to capacity, Japanese officials say, and could doom the Abe government's plans to reopen many of Japan's 50 surviving reactors.

Kono says renegotiating this agreement — which many politicians regard as sacrosanct — is the single biggest challenge to unraveling the plans of the “nuclear village.”

A latent nuclear arsenal ?

After the Fukushima disaster, some of Kono's political adversaries embraced another argument in favor of the country's reactors and the Rokkasho plant that may seem surprising to some in the West : Operating these facilities sends a useful signal to would-be aggressors that Japan could quickly develop nuclear arms.

“There's a pro-nuclear power plant argument that we need to keep the nuclear reactor running so that we can pretend that we may have a nuclear weapon one day,” Kono said during the late-night interview in his apartment house.

Shigeru Ishiba, a former defense minister who was Kono's rival for a ruling party leadership post in 2009 and is now its general secretary, caused a stir in October 2011 when he told Sapio, a right-wing magazine, that Japan's commercial nuclear reactors “would allow us to produce a nuclear warhead in a short amount of time.” He added : **“It's a tacit deterrent.”**

Many prominent Japanese officials still want the capability to produce nuclear arms if they were needed, according to Naoto Kan, who held a series of top government financial and strategic policy positions before becoming Japan's prime minister from 2010 to 2011, representing the Democratic Party of Japan — the LDP's main rival. He said the desire for a nuclear weapons capability is an important source of support for Japan's plutonium programs.

“Inside Japan, and that is not only within the Democratic Party of Japan, there are entities who wish to be able to maintain the ability to produce Japan's own plutonium,” Kan said in an interview with the Center for Public Integrity in his parliamentary office. “They do not say it in public, but they wish to have the capability to create nuclear weapons in case of a threat.”

Japan has a pacifist constitution, and a 47-year-old policy of ruling out the production, possession or introduction of nuclear weapons on Japanese soil. It has signed and ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and is a leading advocate of nuclear arms control.

Moreover, all of Japan's existing plutonium stockpile is under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, while its uranium — a linchpin of any effort to restart the country's civilian reactors — is

largely imported.

These large challenges would have to be overcome for Japan to embark on a weapons program, according to [Jacques E.C. Hymans](#) at the University of Southern California and other scholars.

But a potential linkage between Rokkasho's product and nuclear weapons has hung over the program from the start. Kumao Kaneko, a 76-year-old former director of the Nuclear Energy Division of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told the Center for Public Integrity that Tokyo pressed the Carter administration in 1977 for permission to start producing plutonium partly to ensure Japan had a weapons option. [Restored this background]

The U.S. has long been concerned about potential development of a Japanese bomb, since Japan has the scientific skills, infrastructure and — most important — the raw explosive material in the form of plutonium, hundreds of pounds of weapons-grade uranium, and the technology to produce more. Washington's worry is that such an arsenal would set off a regional arms race, complicating Japan's relations with its neighbors, some of whom would clamor for a similar capability.

U.S. policymakers have pursued a two-pronged path to blocking that development : Over the past four years, they have quietly brought a stream of Japanese diplomats and military officers into highly restricted U.S. nuclear weapons centers — including the Strategic Command headquarters in Nebraska, a Minuteman missile base in Montana, and a Trident submarine base outside Seattle — to remind them of the robustness of the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

The U.S. also has gently urged Japan to cap or reduce the size of its plutonium stockpile. Its officials have encouraged Japan to reopen its closed reactors, in part so any newly-created plutonium can be burned at the same rate it is being produced. U.S. officials confirm they've also pressed Japan to give up, through repatriation to the United States, some of its existing plutonium stocks before production gets under way.

But the U.S. has not urged Japan to cancel its Rokkasho project, several current and former senior U.S. and Japanese officials said. Authorities say one reason Washington has not offered that advice is that killing it — and all the future nuclear power plants linked to it — would increase Japan's dependence on traditional energy supplies and drive up their price on the world market, adversely impacting the U.S. economy.

"Obviously what is done in the long term at Rokkasho is a decision for the Japanese people, the Japanese government to make," Deputy Energy Secretary Daniel Poneman said during a July 2012 press conference in Tokyo. He added that "to the extent that there would be paths forward for Rokkasho" that could avoid increasing Japan's stockpile of plutonium, "that would be a good thing."

Poneman coupled this, however, with a public pitch for letting Japan use nuclear power to reduce carbon emissions, acknowledging that it is an important tool "for our friends and colleagues in Japan ... who are very worried about climate change."

Jon Wolfstahl, who until two years ago served as a nonproliferation expert on the staff of Vice President Joe Biden and the White House National Security Council, said many in the administration believed that Japan wouldn't listen to pleas for canceling Rokkasho, and that insisting on it would only fracture U.S. relations with the country.

"They don't need the United States to tell them that Rokkasho is a giant waste of money and that there's no need for them to start marching down this road," Wolfstahl said. "But I'm not sure there's much the U.S. could do about it."

[Gary Samore](#), who directed nuclear proliferation policy at the White House during Obama's first term,

put it more bluntly : “If the Japanese government really decided, ‘yes, we’re going to turn it on,’ then the Obama administration would have to make a decision,” he said.

Either the United States will have to stick “with existing policy, which is not to object,” or it will have to try to persuade Japan to abandon its plutonium manufacturing plan.

Toshihiro Okuyama and Yumi Nakayama, staff writers for the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun, contributed reporting for this article.

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