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Japan's Nuclear Crisis: A Wakeup Call for the World 日本の核機器――世界への警鐘

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By Gavan McCormack -- After years of warnings about the "North Korean nuclear threat" now suddenly the entire Northeast Asian region is subjected to the "Japan nuclear threat," just as North Korea has been warning for years. Apart from the Fukushima meltdown risk, how safe is Japan's plutonium mountain, accumulating in the waste piles and underground parking places outside reactors up and down the country, 50 odd tons of radioactive sludge, and at the vast repositories at Rokkasho, just up the road from Fukushima, which has a planned reprocessing capacity of 800 tons of spent fuel per year, including eight tons of plutonium?

It is surely time now to revisit, debate, and in due course reverse the policies adopted especially in the New National Energy Policy of 2006, which defined the future of the country as a "nuclear state" (genshiryoku rikkoku). The bureaucrats have for decades struggled to overcome Japan's "Hiroshima syndrome..." (See related McCormack 2007 essay, "Japan as a Plutonium Superpower," here)

The cargo cult bureaucratic vision of eternal energy security drives not just the conventional nuclear reactors but the push for full commercial reprocessing, fast breeders, MOX, Monju, etc. The recycling of plutonium in the form of MOX fuel went against sound international advice and now MOX has multiplied and plutonium-ized the risk.

In light of the disaster unfolding in Fukushima Japan and the rest of the civilian nuclear power countries, Japan should now move toward a democratic consensus on the way forward choosing between three main options:

1) Maintain but reinforce (and possibly expand) civilian nuclear power programs by making them "safe";

2) Wind down nuclear power but hold power output in the remaining plants to roughly current levels in the grid (phasing out the old reactors and applying new standards to the existing), including quake-proofing to magnitude 9 all those plants to be maintained, while finding supplementary energy sources;

or

3) Set a target date for the abolition of civilian nuclear power in the name of a dramatically different energy policy that shifts toward renewables.

The debate is fundamentally about the course of civilization, hinted at by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who described over the weekend Japan's nuclear power crisis as a "turning point for the world," adding that Germany "could not carry on as usual given that an explosion at a nuclear plant happened despite Japan's high safety standards" (indirect quote).

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