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Nuclear Power and Shifts in Japanese Public Opinion 原子力発電と日本における世論の推移

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Matthew Penney

In April 2011, about a month after the 3.11 disasters, Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* reported that opposition to nuclear power had changed fairly little. A 2007 poll established that 7% of Japanese wished to do away with nuclear power completely, 21% wished to decrease reliance, 53% wanted to maintain the current situation, and 13% wanted more nuclear power generation. April 2011 numbers were only marginally different: 11% desired elimination of nuclear power, 30% wanted a decrease, 51% wanted to maintain the current situation, and 5% wished for an increase. 56% however reported "much unease" at the Fukushima accident with a further 33% feeling "some unease". While there was no immediate turnabout in public opinion, increasingly critical reporting in the second half of 2011 from the *Asahi* and *Manichi Shimbun,* weeklies like *Kinyobi* and *Diamond*, as well as the publication of dozens of books highlighting malfeasance in the nuclear industry, the safety oversights leading up to the Fukushima Daiichi meltdowns, and decades of casual irradiation of temporary workers in the nuclear industry, a great shift seems to be underway.

In November of last year, national broadcaster NHK reported the results of an opinion poll that indicated 70% of Japanese wished to see nuclear power eliminated or reliance on it significantly reduced. The numbers of people feeling uneasy over the spread of radiation from Fukushima Daiichi declined little through the year, highlighting the fact that the government response, even with the shift from the Kan to Noda cabinets and accompanying promises of increased disclosure, has done little to alleviate public fears of contamination of the environment, food chain and health effects.

A *Yomiuri Shimbun* article released around the same time as the NHK report, however, suggested that the Japanese public is resigned to maintaining the use of nuclear power in the short term. When given the option, 57% of those polled indicated that they wish to see existing plants continue to operate, while believing that no new ones should be built. Japanese public opinion on this issue is complex and the phrasing of questions and the answer options that poll respondents can choose from can result in very different results. Taking the NHK and *Yomiuri* polls together, however, shows strong resistance to new plants being built, but also indicates a continued commitment to nuclear energy in the short to medium term.

What about the long term, however? Another *Yomiuri* poll, this time mainly focused on relations between Japan and its neighbours and also reported in November 2011, may shed some light on this crucial question. First, 87% of Japanese polled in the negative when asked if their government did an adequate job of providing information to the public after 3.11. When asked what type of energy Japan should rely on in the future, a great majority of 71% chose solar with only 6% picking nuclear and the balance going to oil and natural gas and other answers. When these numbers are taken into account, it seems that the Japanese public is solidly behind government plans to fund solar energy research and development, and no longer imagines nuclear to be a long term option.

Finally, a government survey on lifestyle released on January 30 reveals that nearly 60% of Japanese report that they have tried to cut down on energy use since 3.11. By comparison, only 28% report acting on feelings of unease about food safety by "taking care" in selecting food products. By this measure it appears that concern with energy policy as well as with individual energy use may be becoming a significant legacy of 3.11 for the public nationwide. Also important to note, however, is that far more Japanese want the government to address medical care, pensions, and the social safety net (67.1%) and economic recovery (66.3%) then recovery from the 3.11 disasters (51%). While the crisis of last year captured international attention and the attention of Japan watchers specifically, it is necessary to keep in mind that for many Japanese, lingering issues of economic decline, poverty, inequality, and the problems associated with ageing (a "problem" that 53.4% believe needs to be immediately addressed) remain at the forefront.

Matthew Penney is an Assistant Professor at Concordia University and a Japan Focus Coordinator.