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Japanese Nuclear Power Generation Comes to a Vietnamese Village

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While the Fukushima Daiichi accident remains unresolved and the cause of the accident not yet clarified, in this uncertain situation, Japan is planning to export nuclear power to Vietnam. What has become visible at the proposed Vietnamese site is the precise method that Japan used in the past in determining where to locate its own nuclear plants. And the failure to provide the villagers most directly affected with basic information about nuclear power and the consequences of the plant.

In Vietnamese, tsunami is called Songchon, literally translated it is a "divine wave".

"Songchon has never come to our village. Japan's accident, we hear, is the result of a great earthquake. Here, no such thing occurs, so it's absolutely safe to build a nuclear power plant. If something happens, we're closest to it, so we can be the first to run away," says Ngo Quoc Khanh (56).

It is difficult to judge whether the last part of his comment was joking or serious. However, concerning the safety of the nuclear power plant to be built in his village, he showed no insecurity to the very end of our conversation.

I heard similar views from other villagers, too. A woman selling vegetables in the market, elementary students on the way home from school, a man who lives in front of the billboard announcing the plan—none of these people exhibited fear or distrust concerning the nuclear power plant. In Japan today we cannot encounter people who have no sense of crisis to this extent.

The nuclear power plant to be constructed by moving all residents away

In Ninh Thuan in south central Vietnam, about twenty kilometers from the provincial capital Pham Rang, the village of Tay Anh is the site of the nuclear power plant to be built by Japan. This will be Japan's first nuclear power plant export. Tay Anh has some 700 households, 1500 people in all. It's a quiet village, half agriculture and half fishing. The village faces the South China Sea and in the coastal area little fish abound along the beautiful seashore. The sandy shore is a breeding ground for rare green turtles and the adjacent area is designated as a national park. The climate is mild but there is not much rain. The arable land is not well suited to rice cultivation but garlic and scallions are cultivated.

Mr. Ngo, who was born and raised in Tay Anh village, is a farmer who makes a living mostly by growing grapes which is another special product of this area. On a quiet straight road from the village to his farm, he points to an area with grape vines that commands a view of the sea and explains that this will be the central area of the power plant.

The first nuclear power plant will be built on this site in Ninh Thuan Province in southeastern Vietnam

According to the plan, by 2014, all residents of the village will be relocated two kilometers away and the village will become a nuclear power plant village. He too will have to part with his grape fields, which he must have cared for painstakingly. "They say that they will give us substitute farms in the area we relocate to. No one is delighted to leave the village, but it can't be helped as it's for the development of the country."

A Japan astray sells nuclear power plants

Vietnam is planning to build fourteen nuclear power plants by 2030. So far they have decided on the first two stations with a total of four reactors, and Russia and Japan have agreed to build them. Japan is to construct the second power plant and is proposing two units of one million kilowatts. The contract is said to be worth approximately 100 million yen and operations are scheduled to start in 2021.

The Japanese government reached this agreement, which includes providing support to finance the nuclear power plant, train about 1,000 Vietnamese technicians in Japan per year, and provide infrastructure maintenance through the Overseas Development Agency. The Democratic Party administration from the very start emphasized the exports as a pillar of a new growth strategy to concentrate on overseas sales campaigns organized a single administrative body that combines government officials and civil sectors. Under the influence of the Fukushima Daiichi accident, these efforts stagnated. But the Noda administration has restarted the export drive. Within the country, government policy remains astray, but when it comes to nuclear power plant sales to foreign countries, the Noda administration leads the way.

The Vietnamese approved nuclear power plant construction in 2009, but even earlier talks with Japan were underway and agreement reached for Japan's cooperation in building the plants. Following Japan's great earthquake and nuclear accident, the Vietnamese government stated that there would be no change in the cooperative relationship between the two countries. At the time of the prime minister's visit to Japan last autumn, a joint statement formally reaffirming nuclear power plant construction was issued, signed by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Prime Minister Noda.[1]

The nuclear power plant project is a national project for Vietnam. Its success or failure appears to be crucial to the survival of both the Vietnamese and Japan administrations.

Artist's conception of Vietnam's first nuclear power plant

Vietnamese villagers invited to Japan

Mr. Ngo visited Japan in the summer of 2010 before the earthquake and tsunami at the invitation of a Japanese electric power company. He says he went to observe the operation of nuclear power plants in Japan at the invitation of "a Japanese electric company." He visited an electric power company in Tokyo and three nuclear power plants, including Fukushima.

The Tay Anh village master and he participated. The Vietnamese group of seven included villagers from adjacent villages. At that point, Tay Anh village was being considered one possible site of nuclear power construction. So residents of other possible sites also made the trip.

What about Vietnams's first nuclear power plant, whose contract in the end went to Russia. The site planned for the first site was Binh Chuon village. Villagers from Binh Chuon, also in Ninh Thuan province, too were invited to Japan, though at a different time.

At that time, residents of places that were being considered for nuclear power plant construction may all have participated in observing Japan's nuclear power plants. What is clear is that cooperation was steadily proceeding to produce resident consensus concerning the construction of nuclear power plants.

"What was impressive in Japan was the story that we heard from a person living near a nuclear power plant. He said that a nuclear power plant may create small troubles, but there is no big accident. So I was relieved."

Mr. Ngo suddenly recalled something . . . which was the earthquake that occurred after visiting Japan: the nuclear power plant accidents, and the subsequent tragedies. So I asked him what he now thinks about nuclear power. He answered that he had never experienced or hear of a big disaster. He repeated that nuclear power was safe in the same way quoted in the beginning of this essay.

"After the earthquake a Japanese person came and explained to the village master that there was no problem. Villagers came to my place after seeing the news on TV. But I explained to them that on the basis of their experience with the accident, they are building a new plant. So our experience will be absolutely safe."

Mr. Ngo says that he doesn't know technical specifications of the nuclear power plant that he visited in Japan, but he was impressed by the Japanese people who ran the large and complex facility. During their visit to Japan, the people they met repeated how safe nuclear power was and the visitors were instructed to relay the story after returning to the village.

Invisible "safety myth"

However, whatever information Vietnamese visitors gathered in Japan was hardly conveyed to Tay Anh villagers. Villagers told me that they heard that a visit to Japan had taken place, but there had been no explanations about what they had learned. Neither the nation nor the village authorities talked directly to the residents about details of the nuclear power plan.

While hearing stories in this village, I felt the overwhelming inadequacy of available knowledge about nuclear power. There is the issue of safety, which was emphasized by those associated with the nuclear power industry, but the dangers of nuclear power, which have steadily surfaced since the earthquake, and sloppy crisis management, are hardly conveyed to villagers.

What kind of thing is nuclear power, and how did the lives of Fukushima villagers change as a result of the nuclear power accident? What will be the future of the place where they lived? What I see among Vietnamese in the midst of nuclear power plant construction is the impossibility of their learning about nuclear power. Above all, they lack both consciousness of the issues and sufficient information.

The reason that Tay Anh villagers are not negative about nuclear power is not that they actively endorse its safety. The reason is that no negative information is disclosed to them. Their trust in the Japanese people's high technical ability seems to influence the residents' consciousness of nuclear power.

Thus I unexpectedly heard the safety myth about nuclear power in Tay Anh village. It floated among villagers like a ghost that has no substance.

"Hanoi and government officials determine everything"

In October 2010 the site for the construction of the second nuclear power plant was formally announced, but subsequently the idea surfaced to combine the two sites. According to a report in *Vietnam News*, Minh Tuan province people's committee suggested that the second plant be moved next to the first plant and Tay Anh village be developed into a sightseeing place. Ultimately, no agreement was reached between the committee and the central government. The plan then reverted to the original idea. But this business negotiation also bypassed Tay Anh villagers. "Everything is determined by Hanoi and by provincial government officials sent from Hanoi." I heard such comments, which sound like giving up hope. In Tay Anh village, feasibility studies for the nuclear power plant have begun, and some Japanese involved in the project are already going in and out of the village. In the midst of this, Tay Anh villagers seem uninterested in whether it is good to construct a nuclear power plant but only in questions of compensation for moving out of the village, which is to be announced this year.

The country, which painfully experienced the danger of nuclear power and is still unable to resolve the pain, is not sufficiently conveying that pain to the country which is for the first time planning to use nuclear power. I wonder how much the presence of the residents is within the consciousness of the planners and whether these people, who are to be placed at the front line of a national enterprise, will be protected.

The Prime Minister of Vietnam who came to Japan again in April this year commented about the availability of information on nuclear power plants. "We are accurately giving necessary information so that the government can secure the agreement of the people." However, from visiting the actual site and examining the process so far, I cannot refrain from raising questions about his words.

In the end, one more thing. Vietnam, which has a long coastline, has received from the sea both favors and many kinds of disasters.

I wonder why Vietnamese call the tsunami divine wave. That was on my mind as I gazed at the peaceful sea before Tay Anh village.

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Notes

[1] The joint statement of October 31, 2011 included this language http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/noda/diplomatic/201110/31vietnam_e.html

The two sides welcomed the progress made in their cooperation for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The Japanese side committed to enhance nuclear safety by sharing the experience and lessons learned with regard to the nuclear accident at TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant with utmost transparency and explained its plans to enhance nuclear safety. The Vietnamese side, welcoming such Japanese efforts, explained in detail the necessity of nuclear power for securing Vietnam's energy supply and expressed its strong desire for the provision of nuclear technologies from Japan. The Japanese side expressed its intention to provide Viet Nam with the technologies that represent the world's highest level of nuclear safety.

The Japanese side highly appreciated the Government of Viet Nam's approval of the Japan-Viet Nam Agreement on peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The Vietnamese side expressed its hope for the early conclusion of this Agreement after the completion of necessary internal procedures in Japan.

The two sides recalled the decision by the Government of Viet Nam to choose Japan as the cooperating partner for building two reactors at the second nuclear power plant site in Ninh Thuan Province, Viet Nam. The two sides welcomed the progress made since the last Summit Meeting in October 2010 and the document to confirm such progress between the project. Translator's note.

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