

Concerns Voiced by Japan over IAEA, U.S. Proposals

On October 25, the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy (ANRE), under the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), held the fourth meeting of its Nuclear Power Subcommittee, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Advisory Committee for Natural Resources and Energy's Electric Utility Industry Subcommittee. After a presentation by ANRE on (1) its ideas about how Japan should respond to a proposal on multilateral nuclear approaches (MNA), outlined in detail below, and (2) a supply-and-demand outlook for global uranium resources and the consequences for Japan, the members discussed various issues. ANRE also proposed that public loans be extended to the Japanese nuclear industry to facilitate their exports overseas (see separate article).

At the meeting, ANRE advocated that Japan take proactive steps to influence two proposals made at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in September: one concerning MNA, and the other concerning guaranteed nuclear fuel supplies. The first comprised of an international framework – suggested by Director General Mohamed ElBaradei – that would be managed multilaterally, guaranteeing the supply of nuclear technology and fuel. Meanwhile, another framework, proposed by the American representative at IAEA, would guarantee a supply of nuclear fuel to countries that gave up their independent enrichment and reprocessing activities. Other nations were called upon to participate in those frameworks.

Given the increasing seriousness of nuclear proliferation concerns, as evidenced by Iran's nuclear development, and given that the two proposals above are likely to materialize in some form or other, ANRE is worried that additional proposals will be made seeking uniform regulation. That would significantly impact Japan, as the only state without nuclear weapons to maintain internationally recognized commercial nuclear-cycle facilities, from enrichment to reprocessing.

Unless it makes a concrete counterproposal – that is, if it remains passive by simply pointing out the proposals' shortcomings – Japan may find itself isolated, possibly impeding the smooth operation of its cycle facilities. Director Tadao Yanase of ANRE's Nuclear Policy Planning Division stressed the importance of Japan's participation in international rulemaking for multilateral management, saying, "Japan will become isolated if it stays in its trench."

ANRE proposed that Japan ought to face those problems squarely by suggesting the concrete contributions it could make. That should be done, ANRE went on to say, taking into account both Japan's ties with the U.S. and the needs of its neighbors in East Asia. ANRE noted three areas in which the country could immediately offer its cooperation: (1) developing mines under an international framework, with financial support by public bodies; (2) supplying enriched uranium to other countries, using the advanced centrifugal separator now under development; and (3) providing fuel fabrication services in Japan, using surplus domestic capacity.



JNFL's Rokkasho Reprocessing Facilities

Several subcommittee members said that Japan should be more forceful in affirming its basic position – namely, its commitment to the peaceful use of nuclear energy – but many other members instead endorsed the idea of more actively coping with the consequences of the two proposals.

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possibility of reprocessing services in Japan, saying that it could be considered in the context of a second reprocessing plant to be built after the Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant.

We should here note the dangerous aspect of the IAEA's MNA concept. The Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant is a model for the world in terms of proliferation resistance, and Japan can be justly proud of it. If Japan accepts multilateral management, unnecessarily restricting the reprocessing project, it will never be viable as a private business. Multilateral management sounds good, but what it means is that the business will be directly affected by shifts in international political balances. We learned that lesson domestically when nuclear power plants (NPPs) in Fukushima Prefecture were forced to suspend operations for inspections because of political pressure from the governor there. We should avoid letting the Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant become a political tool that other countries can use to pressure Japan.

In short, if Japan is hindered from proceeding with its chosen nuclear policy of reprocessing, then one of the reasons for promoting nuclear power, namely, energy security, will have been undermined.

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