

Cooler Discussions Required on Energy

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In the afternoon on April 17, Tokyo Electric Power Co. Chairman Tsunehisa Katsumata announced a roadmap toward resolving the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident caused by the March 11 tsunami, predicting that it would take six to nine months to achieve a stable state where reactor cooling functions would be fully restored. The presentation of such prediction may be welcomed as indicating some progress in efforts to resolve the accident. As a Japanese citizen, I would like to pay my full respect to those who are risking their lives to tackle the accident.

Politicians' irresponsible remarks

Reportedly, Prime Minister Naoto Kan has strongly asked TEPCO to prepare a roadmap for resolving the accident. He should have been naturally required to do so. Rather, it is more important for him to send a persuasive message directly to the people. What a statesman should present is how to reconstruct a stable energy supply system that is the precondition for the restoration of the Japanese economy and the key to national security.

The accident has caused the world to panic and inevitably gnawed at national sentiment in Japan. But I doubt the appropriateness of ruling and opposition camp politicians' panicky calls for energy policy revisions just after the accident began. On March 17, Liberal Democratic Party President Sadakazu Tanigaki said, "It has become difficult to promote the nuclear energy policy." In response, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said on March 18, "Mr. Tanigaki's remark was very natural." I sighed heavily about the picture in which ruling and opposition camp politicians shared the same view only on such a thing.

Surely, Japan should not promote the traditional nuclear energy policy that has been criticized for underrating risks to secure lower costs and brushing off safety. If these politicians' remarks were meant to call for devoting far more costs and labor to securing safety, they would be acceptable. But their irresponsible remarks were nothing more than a superficial performance stirring up a national sentiment that nuclear power plants are terrible.

Japan cannot shift away from nuclear plants

Japan should not or cannot shift away from nuclear power plants. First, Japan

cannot achieve the best mix of electricity sources without nuclear plants. If Japan shifts away from nuclear plants in line with the current antinuclear sentiment, electricity shortages may become chronic to affect the Japanese economy and livelihood. Second, any greater dependence on fossil energy sources such as coal, oil and liquefied natural gas may accelerate the destabilization of the electricity supply mix, make it difficult to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and increase costs substantially. Third, foreign countries will build nuclear plants steadily while watching the Japanese accident, even if Japan hastily shifts away from nuclear energy. In fact, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) vowed to promote nuclear power generation in their joint declaration after their summit meeting in Sanya, China, on April 14.

Japan is positioned to learn lessons from the latest accident. If Japan shifts away from nuclear power plants while having no nuclear weapons, the nation may decisively lag behind other countries in nuclear control technology required for national security policy. Japan should discuss how to learn lessons from the accident and increase nuclear plant safety, rather than whether to shift away from nuclear plants. Statesmen must demonstrate their broader perspectives.

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