

Nuclear Japan. Tokyo's Response to Fukushima: Boost the Nuclear Energy Industry, Restart Old Reactors

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American nuclear officials are wary of Japan's new nuclear push

Official Japanese policy on nuclear power has swung full circle since the Fukushima disaster of 2011 – from avidly pro-nuclear power then, to rejecting nuclear power as too dangerous, and now back to avidly pushing on to re-start old reactors and build new ones. Adding the [chronic secrecy and denial](#) of the nuclear industry to such politically-driven indecision making, Japan has created a funhouse of distorting mirrors from which emerging information about the on-going Fukushima disaster cannot be considered credible without reliable, independent verification. Reliable and credible information about Fukushima is just what authorities in Japan and around the world apparently do not want.

Before March 11, 2011, the Japanese prime minister was outspokenly in favor of Japan's pro-nuclear power policy. Then the earthquake and tsunami combined with nuclear design flaws to destroy four of the six nuclear reactors at Fukushima, causing the accident that has continued ever since. And Prime Minister [Naoto Kan](#), immersed in responding to the crisis, shifted his view. He ordered another aging plant closed and announced a freeze on plans for any future nuclear plants in Japan. In July 2011, with his popularity at its lowest point, the prime minister called for Japan to [reverse policy](#) and [end its dependence](#) on nuclear power. With the passage of a renewable energy bill that he supported, [Kan, 64, resigned](#) at the end of August, although still the first [prime minister](#) since 2006 to serve more than one year (451 days; his successor served 481).

The present prime minister, Shinzo Abe, completed his first year in office on December 26, 2013 (he previously served for less than a year in 2006-07, when he was the youngest Japanese prime minister since World War II). Prime Minister Abe has moved aggressively to expand Japan's reliance on nuclear power, even though the country has [no nuclear waste repository](#) and already has more than 14,000 tons of spent fuel in cooling pools at 50 nuclear plants around the country. During a visit to Japan in early December 2013, the head of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, [Allison Macfarlane](#), cautioned Japan about nuclear expansion as long as there's no place in the world to store nuclear waste safely.

Setting the stage for nuclear expansion, the prime minister in March 2013 had [purged the membership](#) of Japan's nuclear advisory panel of all but two of its anti-nuclear members who had supported Japan's non-nuclear energy policies. He reduced the 25 member panel to 15, of whom 13 are [avidly pro-nuclear](#) (some with bald conflicts of interest). The man chosen to head the panel, [Akio Mimura](#), is an advisor to a company involved in nuclear construction,

and he is the same man who headed a similar panel that shaped the policies that preceded the Fukushima meltdowns. Since then, all of Japan's nuclear reactors have been shut down. The prime minister is [pushing to re-start](#) them as soon as possible despite polling last fall showing 60% of the population in favor of a [zero-nuclear proposal](#).

Could Fukushima Fallout Lead Japan to Nuclear Weapons?

Adding an unsettling edge to Japan's pro-nuclear policy, Prime Minister Abe has foreshadowed a growing Japanese militarism that has drawn outspoken disapproval from both South Korea and China, where the horrors of Japanese military occupation during the mid-twentieth century are far from forgotten. The offense Abe gave was to visit the 1869 Japanese [Yasukuni Shrine](#) that honors some 2.5 million war Japanese dead, 2.1 million of them from World War II, including more than 1,000 [convicted war criminals](#). Once he was prime minister, Abe suspended visits to the shrine which had first caused him controversy in 2006. But in December 2013, [Prime Minister Abe](#) once again provoked an outcry with a visit to the shrine's war dead. In early January the Chinese government continued to reject back channel contacts on the issue, as a Chinese spokeswoman said that Abe "needs to correctly view and deeply reflect on the Japan's militarist history of external invasion and colonialism, show sincerity and make concrete efforts to improve ties with neighboring countries." Even the United States expressed some concern: "the United States is disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors."

Japan's territorial dispute with nuclear-armed China over the Senkaku Islands off the China mainland has raised fears of armed conflict in recent years. Part of Japan's response has included nationalizing the islands and raising its national defense spending. Three [Chinese Coast Guard](#) vessels sailed into the disputed waters for about two hours January 11, before leaving peacefully.

Further adding to the wariness of Japan's neighboring countries presumably is Prime Minister Abe's expand the [Japanese military](#) to allow Japan to defend itself. Japan's large [stockpile of Plutonium](#) (44 tons, enough for more than 6,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs), puts Japan much closer to having nuclear weapons than Iran and most other non-nuclear nations. Ironically, the last Japanese Prime Minister to cause offense by visiting the shrine in 2006 is [Junichiro Koizumi](#), who was once unquestioningly pro-nuclear, but is now a major proponent of a [nuclear free Japan](#).

There is little comfort in knowing that the walls of secrecy Japan has been putting up around Fukushima and other nuclear power activities will surely make it harder to know what if any weapons programs the country undertakes. And there is even less comfort in knowing that no international body, no government, no non-governmental nuclear regulator is raising any active, public challenge to Japanese nuclear secrecy, civilian or military.

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