

Australian Uranium Fuelled Fukushima

The Fukushima disaster was fuelled by Australian uranium but lessons were not learned and the industry continues to fuel global nuclear insecurity with irresponsible uranium export policies.

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Fukushima was an avoidable disaster, fuelled by Australian uranium and the hubris and profiteering of Japan’s nuclear industry in collusion with compromised regulators and captured bureaucracies.

The Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission – established by the Japanese Parliament – concluded in its 2012 [report](#) that the accident was “a profoundly man-made disaster that could and should have been foreseen and prevented” if not for “a multitude of errors and wilful negligence that left the Fukushima plant unprepared for the events of March 11”.

The accident was the result of “collusion between the government, the regulators and TEPCO”, the commission found.

Mining

But overseas suppliers who turned a blind eye to unacceptable nuclear risks in Japan have largely escaped scrutiny or blame. Australia’s uranium industry is a case in point.

Yuki Tanaka from the Hiroshima Peace Institute [noted](#):

“Japan is not the sole nation responsible for the current nuclear disaster. From the manufacture of the reactors by GE to provision of uranium by Canada, Australia and others, many nations are implicated.”

There is no dispute that Australian uranium was used in the Fukushima reactors. The mining companies won’t acknowledge that fact — instead they hide behind claims of “commercial confidentiality” and “security”.

But the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office acknowledged in October 2011 that:

“We can confirm that Australian obligated nuclear material was at the Fukushima Daiichi site and in each of the reactors — maybe five out of six, or it could have been all of them”.

BHP and Rio Tinto, two of the world’s largest mining companies, supplied Australian uranium to TEPCO and that uranium was used to fuel Fukushima.

Tsunamis

The mining companies have failed to take any responsibility for the catastrophic impacts on Japanese society that resulted from the use of their uranium in a poorly managed, poorly regulated industry.

Moreover, the mining companies can’t claim ignorance. The warning signs were clear. Australia’s uranium industry did nothing as TEPCO and other Japanese nuclear companies lurched from scandal to scandal and accident to accident.

The uranium industry did nothing in 2002 when it was revealed that TEPCO had systematically and routinely falsified safety data and breached safety regulations for 25 years or more.

The uranium industry did nothing in 2007 when over 300 incidents of ‘malpractice’ at Japan’s nuclear plants were revealed – 104 of them at nuclear power plants.

It did nothing even as the ability of Japan’s nuclear plants to withstand earthquakes and tsunamis came under growing criticism from industry insiders and independent experts.

Vicious cycle

And the uranium industry did nothing about the multiple conflicts of interest plaguing Japanese nuclear regulators.

Mirrarr senior Traditional Owner **Yvonne Margarula** – on whose land in the Northern Territory Rio Tinto’s Ranger mine operated – said she was “[deeply saddened](#)” that uranium from Ranger was exported to Japanese nuclear companies including TEPCO.

No such humility from the uranium companies. They get tetchy at any suggestion of culpability, with the Australian Uranium Association describing it as “opportunism in the midst of human tragedy” and “utter nonsense”.

Yet, Australia could have played a role in breaking the vicious cycle of mismanagement in Japan’s nuclear industry by making uranium exports conditional on improved management of nuclear plants and tighter regulation.

Even a strong public statement of concern would have been heard by the Japanese utilities – unless it was understood to be rhetoric for public consumption – and it would have registered in the Japanese media.

Safety

But the uranium industry denied culpability and instead stuck its head in the sand. Since the industry is in denial about its role in fuelling the Fukushima disaster, there is no reason to

believe that it will behave more responsibly in future.

Successive Australian governments did nothing about the unacceptable standards in Japan's nuclear industry. **Julia Gillard** – Australia's Prime Minister at the time of the Fukushima disaster – [said](#) the disaster "doesn't have any impact on my thinking about uranium exports".

Signification elements of Japan's corrupt 'nuclear village' – comprising industry, regulators, politicians and government agencies – were [back in control](#) just a few years after the Fukushima disaster. Regulation remains [problematic](#).

Add to that ageing reactors, and companies facing serious economic stress and intense competition, and there's every reason for ongoing concern about nuclear safety in Japan.

Professor Yoshioka Hitoshi is a Kyushu University academic who served on the government's 2011-12 Investigation Committee on the Accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Stations.

Regulation

They [said](#) in October 2015:

"Unfortunately, the new regulatory regime is ... inadequate to ensure the safety of Japan's nuclear power facilities. The first problem is that the new safety standards on which the screening and inspection of facilities are to be based are simply too lax.

"While it is true that the new rules are based on international standards, the international standards themselves are predicated on the status quo.

"They have been set so as to be attainable by most of the reactors already in operation. In essence, the NRA made sure that all Japan's existing reactors would be able to meet the new standards with the help of affordable piecemeal modifications – back-fitting, in other words."

In the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, UN secretary general **Ban Ki Moon** called for an [independent cost-benefit inquiry](#) into uranium trade. The Australian government failed to act.

Inadequate regulation was a root cause of the Fukushima disaster yet Australia has uranium supply agreements with numerous countries with demonstrably inadequate nuclear regulation, including [China](#), [India](#), [Russia](#), the [United States](#), [Japan](#), [South Korea](#), and [Ukraine](#).

Overthrow

Likewise, Australian uranium companies and the government turn a blind eye to [nuclear corruption scandals](#) in countries with uranium supply agreements: South Korea, India, Russia and Ukraine among [others](#).

Indeed, Australia has signed up to expand its uranium trade [to sell into insecure regions](#).

In 2011 – the same year as the Fukushima disaster – the Australian government agreed to allow uranium exports to India.

This despite [inadequate nuclear regulation](#) in India, and despite India's ongoing expansion of its nuclear weaponry and delivery capabilities.

A uranium supply agreement with the [United Arab Emirates](#) was concluded in 2013 despite the obvious risks of selling uranium into a politically and militarily [volatile](#) region where nuclear facilities have repeatedly been [targeted](#) by adversaries intent on stopping covert nuclear weapons programs. Australia was planning uranium sales to the Shah of Iran months before his overthrow in 1979.

Forced labour

A uranium supply agreement with [Ukraine](#) was concluded in 2016 despite a host of safety and security concerns, and the inability of the International Atomic Energy Agency to carry out safeguards inspections in regions annexed by Russia.

In 2014, [Australia banned uranium sales to Russia](#), with then prime minister **Tony Abbott** stating:

“Australia has no intention of selling uranium to a country which is so obviously in breach of international law as Russia currently is.”

Australia's uranium supply agreement with China, concluded in 2006, has not been reviewed despite abundant [evidence](#) of inadequate nuclear safety standards, inadequate regulation, lack of transparency, repression of whistleblowers, world's worst insurance and liability arrangements, security risks, and widespread corruption.

Civil society and NGO's are campaigning to wind back Australia's atomic exposures in the uranium trade with emphasis on [uranium sales to China](#).

China's [human rights abuses](#) and a range of strategic insecurity issues warrant a cessation of uranium sales. China's ongoing [human rights abuses in Tibet](#) and mass detention and [forced labour](#) against Uyghurs [in Xinjiang](#) are severe breaches of international humanitarian law and UN Treaties.

Weapons

China proliferated nuclear weapons know-how to [Pakistan](#), targets Australia in [cyber-attacks](#), and is causing regional [insecurity on the India border](#), in [Hong Kong](#) and [Taiwan](#), and [in the Pacific](#).

BHP's Olympic Dam is the only company still selling Australian uranium into China. There is a case for the 'Big Australian' [to forego uranium sales](#) overall and an [onus to end sales to China](#).

A federal Parliamentary Inquiry in Australia is investigating [forced labour](#) in China and the options for Australia to respond. A case is before this inquiry to disqualify China from supply of Australian uranium sales – see submission [02](#) on human rights abuses and submission [02.1](#) on security risks.

Australia supplies uranium with scant regard for nuclear safety risks. Likewise, proliferation risks are given short shrift.

Australia has uranium export agreements with all of the 'declared' nuclear weapons states – the US, UK, China, France, Russia – although not one of them takes seriously its obligation under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to pursue disarmament in good faith.

Carte blanche

Australia claims to be working to discourage countries from producing fissile – explosive – material for nuclear bombs, but nonetheless exports uranium to countries blocking progress on the proposed Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

And Australia gives Japan open-ended permission to separate and stockpile plutonium although that stockpiling fans regional proliferation risks and tensions in North-East Asia.

Despite liberal export policies, Australian uranium sales are in long-term decline and now represent only [8.9 percent](#) of world uranium usage.

With the Ranger mine shut down and no longer processing ore for uranium exports, there are only two operating uranium mines in Australia: BHP's [Olympic Dam copper-uranium mine](#) and the smaller General Atomics' Beverley Four Mile operation – both in South Australia.

Uranium accounts for less than 0.3 percent of Australia's export revenue and less than 0.1 percent of all jobs in Australia.

One wonders why an industry that delivers so little is given *carte blanche* by the government to do as it pleases.

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Featured image: Senior Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula was "deeply saddened" that uranium from Rio Tinto's Ranger mine on Mirarr country in the Northern Territory was exported to Japanese nuclear companies including TEPCO. Photo by Dominic O'Brien via The Ecologist

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