

The Next Nagasaki - Nuclear Fears Stalk The World

Threat to the American Public

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A second Hiroshima is happening with the partial meltdowns at Fukushima 1 nuclear reactors. We can only hope the eventual toll in lives comes nowhere near close to that of the world's first atomic catastrophe.

The international community is now asking: Where will be the next Nagasaki?

In the US with its 23 aging reactors of identical design as Fukushima's GE Mark 1 reactors, along with another dozen more of slightly modified design?

In France, the world's most nuclear-dependent country?

Probably not in Germany or Venezuela, which are cutting back their nuclear programs, nor Britain, the world leader in conversion to offshore wind power. Or even China, a solar-energy paragon now scaling back plans for new nuclear plants.

Many people are also wondering: How can the only nation that ever experienced atomic bombings become so trusting in nuclear energy? The answer is both simple and complicated. In the modern economy, the energy to run machines is intertwined with national security, foreign policy and warfare.

Uranium-based Progress

World War II was in essence a contest for fossil fuel. An energy-hungry Japan invaded China for its coal and Indonesia for oil reserves. Nazi Germany's blitzkriegs were aimed at oil fields in Romania, Libya and the Caspian Sea region. The United States and Britain fought the Axis Powers to retain their control over the world's fossil fuel, and they're still doing the same in conflicts with OPEC nations and to control Central Asia and East Asia's continental shelf.

To prevent the recurrence of another Pacific War, Washington tried to wean postwar Japan from its dependence on coal and oil. As Japanese industry revived by the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the US pushed Japan to adopt the "safe and clean" energy of the future - nuclear power. General Electric and Westinghouse were soon given charge of installing a network of nuclear power plants across the island nation, while Tokyo was inducted into the US-launched International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Unlike older fuel resources, nuclear power was the sole proprietary right of the US, which not only dominated uranium mining but also production of boron, the neutron absorbing mineral needed for controlled nuclear reactions. American labs including Los Alamos, Lawrence Livermore and Oakridge are the graduate schools for the world's nuclear

physicists.

In the same period of heady infatuation with technology, the New York World's Fair of 1964-65 was a debutante ball for a brighter "universal" future based on atom-splitting. The General Electric pavilion was called "Progressland" with a multimedia show featuring a "plasma explosion" of plutonium fusion for awe-struck visitors. Japan served as the model of international citizenship and cooperation under the American aegis of atomic power. The Fukushima nuclear plant designed by GE was commissioned in 1971.

The modern myth of safe nuclear power was alternatively resisted and grudgingly accepted by the Japanese public. In more recent years, once negative perceptions toward nuclear provider Tokyo Electric Power company have shifted. A young computer-graphics designer in Tokyo told me that his generation grew up thinking "TEPCO has a god-like aura of infallibility and power greater than the government." My experience as an editor inside the Japanese press reveals how its corporate image was cunningly promoted with "greenwash" commercials falsely claiming environmental-friendliness and hefty ad revenues for television and print media.

Atomic Energy in the Cold War

Japan was no stranger to atomic energy. During the Second World War, the Allies and the Axis competed for an exotic new energy source -uranium. While the Manhattan Project was secretly crafting the atomic bomb in New Mexico, Japan opened uranium mines in Konan, North Korea, which now are the source of Pyongyang's nuclear energy program.

Following the Allied victory, the Soviet Union aimed to break the American nuclear monopoly by establishing a protectorate called the Republic of East Turkestan in China's northwest province of Xinjiang. The rich uranium deposits near Burjin, in the foothills of the Altai mountains, provided the fissionable material for development of Soviet nuclear capability. The hastily dug Soviet mines left behind the curse of radiation disease for the predominantly Uyghur and ethnic Kazakh inhabitants as well as to downstream communities in eastern Kazakhstan. Kazakh and Chinese scientists have since run soil remediation projects, using isotope-gathering trees to cleanse the irradiated land.

To prevent the Soviets from amassing a nuclear arsenal, the Truman administration initiated a top-secret program to control the world's entire uranium supply. Operation Murray Hill focused on sabotaging the Altai mining operations. Douglas MacKiernan, operating under the cover of US vice consul in Urumchi, organized a covert team of anticommunist Russians and Kazakh guerrillas to bomb the Soviet mining facilities. Forced to flee toward Lhasa, MacKiernan was shot dead in case of mistaken identity by a Tibetan border guard and is honored as the CIA's first agent killed in action.

The covert global operations of Operation Murray Hill are carried on today by the CIA's counter-proliferation bureau. A glimpse into its clandestine operations is provided in "Fair Game", the book and movie about Valerie Plame, the agent exposed under the Bush administration. Battles open and covert against nuclear foes have been fought as far afield as Pakistan, Egypt, Libya, Argentina, Indonesia, Myanmar and Iraq as well as against usual suspects Iran and North Korea.

Threat to the American Public

The partial meltdowns at Fukushima 1 are putting Washington into a quandary. Had these radiation releases occurred in North Korea or Iran, Washington could have summoned UN Security Council sessions, demanded IAEA inspections and imposed tough sanctions and possibly military intervention. The meltdowns, however, are from American-designed reactors operating under protocols created by the US.

The Obama administration has, therefore, downplayed the seriousness of the current nuclear drama shaking its security ally Japan. In an unconvincing defensive tone, the American president has backed nuclear energy as part of “the energy mix” supporting the US economy. His pro-nuclear stance is irrational and irresponsible, when smaller allied countries including Britain, the Netherlands and Germany are making massive investments in offshore wind farms in the North Sea to end their dependency on nuclear and fossil fuels.

The international community is well aware of the double standard in policy. The US quietly applauded Israeli air strikes against Saddam Hussein’s Osirak nuclear-energy plant in 1981 and has since demanded ever-stricter sanctions against Tehran and Pyongyang. Yet Washington refuses to lead by example, shrugging off the anti-nuclear movement’s pleas to stop plans for new reactors and shunning calls from the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for total nuclear disarmament. America’s campaign for an atomic monopoly, or at least nuclear dominance, is driving smaller powers toward obtaining a deterrence capability. These nations aren’t some “axis of evil”; they’re just playing the survival game by the rules – not the words – set by Washington.

In the days and months ahead, America’s own citizens will be cringing from the dreaded arrival of radioactive fallout. Terrorism is now practically forgotten when a much wider threat may soon blanket American skies from “sea to shining sea.” Unless Washington moves rapidly toward repudiation of its own nuclear addiction, the specter of another Nagasaki will overshadow the land of the free and home of the brave.

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