

Session 4: Europe's Response to Fukushima

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Summary

Barthélémy Courmont (Institute for International and Strategic Relations) detailed the contrasting European responses to the Fukushima nuclear accident, most clearly represented by the divide between the French and German reactions.

France, which has the largest nuclear energy program in the European Union (EU) with 58 nuclear plants (out of the EU's 143) providing about 80% of its electricity needs, made no change to its nuclear energy policy. Like France, the United Kingdom (the EU's second largest nuclear energy program with 19 plants) and the Czech Republic, among others, defended their civilian nuclear programs by stating that safety lessons should be learned from Fukushima, but that nuclear plants in Europe do not face a risk comparable to that posed by the seismic activity in Japan.

Germany, the third largest nuclear program in the EU with 17 nuclear plants operating prior to Fukushima, decided to immediately shut down 8 of its plants and to phase out nuclear power by 2022. This decision taken by Chancellor Merkel's government was nevertheless not a groundbreaking one, since the previous German government, led by Chancellor Schröder, had instituted a nuclear phase-out policy, which Merkel actually revoked prior to Fukushima. Following Fukushima, the Italian government also chose to back out of its recent reconsideration of nuclear power, which had initially been banned in 1987 as a result of a referendum after the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

Courmont also emphasized that, despite the lack of change in the French nuclear energy policy, the political climate in France is affected by Fukushima. The Green party in

France is gaining ground and calling for a referendum on nuclear energy. Martine Aubry, the secretary general of the Socialist party, praised Merkel's strategy and called for a nuclear phase-out strategy for the long term. Recent opinion polls suggest that the French would be favorable to a gradual decommissioning of nuclear power plants, but not to a more rapid switch such as the one Germany is undertaking. President Sarkozy and his right-wing party are taking a more pragmatic position by suggesting that the German decision constitutes an opportunity for France to sell electricity from its nuclear plants to Germany. Nuclear energy will therefore be an important factor in the 2012 French presidential election.

Hans-Joachim Schmidt (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt) explained the domestic political causes of the German decision to return to a nuclear energy phase-out policy.

Between the 1970s and today, Germany's Green party, a prominent player in German politics, grew in reaction to the country's nuclear energy program and was strengthened by the debate on the NATO Double-Track Decision, the Chernobyl accident, and the issue of spent nuclear fuel disposal (which is still problematic at the moment). The Schröder government's decision to phase out nuclear power in Germany was therefore a reflection of the long-standing anti-nuclear stance of the majority of the German population.

The Merkel government's original extension of Germany's nuclear power program further strengthened support for the Green party, which gained significant ground in recent regional elections that took place in the wake of Fukushima. Merkel's conservative party knew it would not win the next federal election if it did not change its position on nuclear power.

Schmidt also underlined that this recent reversal, arising from long-term societal interests transpiring through short-term political events, will likely have a positive impact on efforts towards nuclear security and nonproliferation by proving to other countries that a state does not need to be nuclear to be powerful.

Session Sketches

Dominique Grenêche (Nuclear Consulting), the session’s moderator, summarized the three main aspects of Europe’s response to Fukushima: public opinion, energy supply strategies and political consequences, and technical safety considerations (as exemplified by the common EU response of putting all 143 European plants to “stress tests”).

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