

Session 6: Japan's Nuclear Crisis

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Summary

The panelists broadly outlined current situation in Japan, lessons learned from the crisis, and implications for US and Japan's nuclear future.

Dr. Suzuki, the first speaker, presented on the current status. Today, Japan is still at the stage of cooling down the reactors, and hopes to contain everything within 6 to 9 months, although this deadline appears unfeasible. Areas of concerns he raised were fragility of nuclear facility hit by the recent tsunami left vulnerable to another accident, and the welfare of citizens hit by the crisis. These citizens lack place to return, since some areas are still contaminated.

Dr. Suzuki also identified causes for failures to take preventive measures by Japanese government. They are: 1. Japanese government and the IAEA underestimated the Tsunami. 2. Japanese government had crisis management issues, such as inadequate emergency response owing to lack of coordination and cooperation between the government and the utilities. 3. Lack of independence between regulatory actor and the industry.

On Japan's nuclear future, Dr. Suzuki projected that the government will face difficulty reintroducing nuclear despite the government's desire. While the current prime minister has scrapped plans to build a number of nuclear reactors in the future, he has not completely discounted use of nuclear energy, for one of the four pillars of energy policy he announced includes nuclear energy with highest safety standard. However, major opposition comes from the public that lacks trust on the government and nuclear energy. Recent poll suggests that 47% of the public supported reducing dependence on nuclear energy.

Sharon Squassoni elaborated on the impacts the crisis has had in the United States. Starting with the executive branch, President Obama reiterated the U.S. commitment to nuclear energy and reassured that U.S. reactors are safe, but acknowledged the need to learn when accident such as the Japan's nuclear crisis arises. On the congressional front, a number of legislations were introduced. For example, Congresswoman Lowey introduced nuclear power licensing act, which stipulated renewing license to same high standard as building new reactors. Congressman Edward required that spent fuel should be moved to dry cask as soon as possible. At the NRC, task force conducted a review and came up with long term solution, including emergency scenario and possibilities of black out. Criticisms on independence of the NRC also surfaced after the crisis.

Sharon closed her remarks by concluding that for US nuclear industry, the leading concern really is on the cost. For several years, US nuclear industry has faced financial woes, and after the Fukushima crisis, they will likely continue to face cost issues, as one of the executives said after the crisis “we should start building natural gas plant.”

The last speaker, professor Nakagome, raised a point on how some states may have different conceptual understanding on security and safety issues. For example, China perceives safety issues without distinguishing it from security issues, but Japan perceives them in separate concepts. Since mutual reliance is key on preserving nuclear security and safety, his point implied needing to address these differences between China, Japan, and South Korea.

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