

Europe's Response to Fukushima

Tamara Spitzer-Hobeika

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Summary

Barthélémy Courmont (Institute for International and Strategic Relations):

The crisis at Fukushima in Japan showed the world that a grave nuclear accident could occur in an advanced industrial and democratic country where technical capabilities were not considered an issue. For this reason, it provoked reactions of one kind or another across European countries. The European Union (EU) has a total of 143 nuclear plants located in 14 of the 27 countries of the Union. France is the largest nuclear power in the EU with 58 operating reactors (and 2 more currently planned), followed by: the United Kingdom with 19 reactors (and 8 currently planned); Germany with 17 reactors (a case to be discussed in more detail below); Sweden with 10 reactors (providing over 50% of the country's electricity needs); Spain with 8 reactors; Belgium with 7 reactors (which is a lot considering the country's size and population); the Czech Republic with 6 reactors; Finland, Hungary, and Slovakia each with 4 reactors; Bulgaria and Romania each with 2 reactors; the Netherlands and Slovenia each with 1 reactor. Once Germany finalizes its move away from nuclear energy, the total of European countries with nuclear energy will drop to 13, so the majority of EU member states will *not* have nuclear power. This may become an influential factor on European public opinion.

Contrarily to the way in which it is portrayed in the media, Germany's decision, following Fukushima, to phase out nuclear power by 2022 is not unprecedented. In 1987, following the Chernobyl nuclear accident, Italy held a referendum that resulted in the country giving up its nuclear power capability. It was only a few months ago that Berlusconi's cabinet received a vote of confidence enabling it to pursue nuclear projects—making Italy a symbol of what we call the “nuclear renaissance” (spurred mainly by the increase in oil prices). Germany itself also gave up nuclear energy 10 years ago: there was an agreement between the SPD-Green coalition and the largest German nuclear energy producers that

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Germany would give up nuclear power by 2021. It was only last year that Angela Merkel revoked the original nuclear phase-out, before reinstating it post-Fukushima (mostly because of public pressure). The recent German decision is therefore not groundbreaking.

France is the country that most depends on nuclear energy in the world, as it obtains almost 80% of its electricity from nuclear, so it is very difficult to envisage France giving up nuclear power in the near future. Nevertheless, in a poll taken on June 4, which asked French people whether they were willing to give up nuclear energy and consider renewable energies, the following opinions were recorded: only 22% percent of respondents supported building new nuclear power plants; 15% percent backed a “switch” decommissioning (that is, following the German example); and 62% supported a gradual decommissioning. So the French are willing to keep nuclear energy for the time being, as long as there is a plan or agenda under which France is thinking about other sources of energies, including renewables. This will undoubtedly have an impact on political decisions taken in the next few years and on the presidential elections next year (2012).

We can already observe the effect of the above French public opinion across political parties. Traditionally, the Green Party in France, just like the one in Germany, supports an exit strategy away from nuclear. Contrarily to its German counterpart, though, the Green Party in France is rather limited. However, it has been growing in the last few years, and in provincial elections last year, the Greens altogether won 16% of the votes, which is an extremely high result for them. Also, both candidates for the primaries of the Green Party, Nicolas Hulot and Eva Joly, have called for a referendum on nuclear energy in France. Moreover, the Green Party has urged the Socialist Party to consider the Green position on nuclear power, in view of a possible alliance between the Greens and the Socialists in the run-up to the 2012 elections. Martine Aubry, the current secretary-general of the Socialist Party and a likely candidate for the primaries, actually praised Angela Merkel’s decision in a public speech and stated that France should seriously consider an exit strategy from nuclear power within 20 to 30 years. Obviously, she has refused to define a concrete agenda and her position might change if she is in fact elected. The other candidates for the Socialist Party all expressed their concerns on nuclear energy, but with varying degrees of intensity. For example, François Hollande, who is currently leading in public opinion polls, said France should consider reducing its share of electricity from nuclear from about 75-80% to 50%, but

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that it cannot consider a bigger step in the foreseeable future. On the other side, the UMP (which is the party of current president, Nicolas Sarkozy) has a very interesting, pragmatic approach. Reacting to the German decision, Sarkozy said that if the Germans stop their reactors and need electricity to replace that which is no longer generated by nuclear, then France will be a candidate to sell nuclear energy to Germany. The German decision is therefore in a sense more welcomed by some in France than the one she had made a year ago, because it creates opportunities for the French nuclear industry.

Countries like the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic quickly followed in France's steps and vigorously defended their countries' nuclear programs. For instance, the British energy minister, Chris Huhne, said: "We need to learn every possible lesson from the Japanese crisis, but there is a big difference: that we are frankly amazingly lucky that we do not live in a seismically-active earthquake zone like Japan." There were indeed similar general statements made in France, which underlined that France is not exposed to the same kind of problems that Japan faced (namely the violent earthquake and tsunami).

There were also some diverging responses to the Japanese crisis at the EU level. The EU energy commissioner, Günther Oettinger, called the Fukushima accident "an apocalypse". The French energy minister, Eric Besson, strongly criticized Oettinger's comment as reflecting a "neurotic" opposition to nuclear power.

To conclude, here are some questions raised by the above: What position would the EU take (if any) if more European countries follow Germany's example away from nuclear power? What are the chances of success of Germany's attempt to switch to renewable energy sources, and what if it does not work? What will France's position on nuclear power be if the Green party scores high in the 2012 elections and pressures a potentially Socialist government? What if a referendum is organized in France and confirms the public's fears on nuclear, just as in Italy in 1987? Is the EU-level divergence on nuclear energy symptomatic of the problems EU members face on addressing issues together, or is it an exceptional case?

Hans-Joachim Schmidt (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt):

In order to understand the German response to Fukushima, you have to go back to history. Germany started its nuclear energy program in the 1950s, just like other European

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countries, by developing a nuclear energy research program. In the 1970s, Germany had its first big public discussions about nuclear energy, as well as its first anti-nuclear protests organized by NGOs. These initial movements against nuclear energy (galvanized by the context of the student revolts in France and in Germany at the time) could be said to be the foundation of the German Green Party. In the 1980s, there were public discussions about the NATO Double-Track Decision followed by the Chernobyl nuclear accident, which further strengthened the Green Party and opponents of nuclear energy. In the 1990s, Germany began to debate the question of nuclear waste disposal, which was very controversial and brought on additional protests. (Just recently, actually, the Germans discovered that their government had lied to them about the reasons for which it elected Gorleben as one of the disposal sites.) All of these developments strengthened the Green Party's place in German society and explain in large part why the majority of the German population now has an anti-nuclear sentiment. So Germans are overall favorable to moving away from nuclear energy.

In 2002, the Social Democratic-Green coalition decided that Germany will renounce nuclear power by 2021. It took 50 years of protests against nuclear energy to get there, but it appears that this is now a final decision. The decision taken in 2010 by the liberal-conservative coalition government (headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel of the CDU Party) to prolong the use of nuclear energy by an average of 12 years actually strengthened the Green Party. Then, after Fukushima, public pressure was overwhelming. Indeed, the 2011 regional elections showed the government that there is no support for the prolongation of nuclear power in Germany. In Bremen, the conservatives (the CDU) fell to third place after the Social Democrats and the Greens. In Baden-Württemberg, which has been governed by the CDU for over 50 years, the Greens had the best results (in terms of increase) as they obtained 26% of the votes, leaving the CDU with only 39% and the Social Democrats with 25%. The conservatives therefore knew that they would not win the next federal elections without changing their position on nuclear power. As a result, the liberal-conservative government decided to issue a moratorium on its nuclear energy extension plan and reconsidered their position. Currently, Germany has stopped 8 out of its 17 nuclear plants (including the Krümmel plant that had many technical issues to begin with). The conservatives thus decided to go back to the Social Democratic-Green 2002 decision and phase out nuclear power by 2022 (only 1 year after later than was originally decided in 2002).

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In reinstating the nuclear phase-out, the conservatives are attempting to weaken the Greens (by adopting the same goal that makes the Greens popular) and, simultaneously, are trying to show the Greens that they can be a credible partner with a shared goal (perhaps in case they need to form a coalition with them). Moreover, conservatives want to find a final solution on nuclear waste disposal (a point included in the new law to phase-out nuclear), as it is an issue that needs to be tackled. The conservatives may nevertheless have another, ulterior motive for doing so: by reopening the debate on disposal, they may also hope to divide and weaken the Green Party. Indeed, in the last parliamentary elections in Finland, the Greens lost many seats because they supported a final nuclear waste disposal solution proposed by the government in power (of which they are a coalition member). It will therefore be very interesting to see what the German Greens' position on disposal will be in the beginning of July when the government is slated to present the new phase-out law.

German NGOs favor a much faster phase-out than the conservative government does—by 2014 or 2017. From the technical point of view, this would be possible because the industry and the energy companies have been preparing for a phase-out since 2002 (and the decision by the current government to prolong the lifespan of nuclear power has not changed this, since it was in effect only for about 8 months).

All in all, returning to the nuclear phase-out is a good decision for nuclear security in Germany. Europe should follow the German example if it wishes to get rid of nuclear security risks. Nuclear waste disposal nevertheless remains a long-term issue. Germany does have a good chance of effectively moving away from nuclear power, thanks to the heavy investments it has made and continues to make in renewable energy. These investments will lead to new technologies being developed in the next 5 to 7 years, including more efficient solar panels. Germany will also have to invest in updating its electricity network. Though there will certainly be difficulties, Germany—with its strong economy and willpower to renounce nuclear energy—has a good chance of succeeding in its nuclear phase-out. If Germany succeeds in setting this example for the world, it will also strengthen nonproliferation efforts with the argument that a country can thrive without nuclear energy.

Dominique Grenêche (Nuclear Consulting):

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To summarize the remarks made by the two speakers, there are three main aspects to Europe's response to Fukushima. The first is the great impact on public opinion. To get more information on this impact, please refer to the recent Gallup "Global Snap" poll that asked 30,000 people in 40 countries what they think about nuclear power before Fukushima and after Fukushima. The poll clearly shows that the majority that was pro-nuclear (about 65%) has greatly declined (to 50% or less) after the nuclear crisis. The second aspect is the political consequences, as explained in detail by our speakers above. The main point is that nuclear power (with its ramifications in terms of safety, terrorism, security of supply, etc.) has become a key political issue in many countries. The third aspect is the technical one, meaning safety issues. Indeed, European countries have started conducting "stress tests" (to check equipment, emergency procedures, safety cultures, etc.) that will eventually be undertaken on the 143 nuclear power plants in the EU.

The future of nuclear power in Europe at large (that is, all the continent, including non-EU members) is surely not uniform. In countries like France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Bulgaria, and others, it seems likely that nuclear power will continue and increase, with little or no policy change post-Fukushima. For a few other countries like Switzerland, Belgium, and Italy, it is not clear what will happen. In Germany, however, it appears certain that the phase-out away from nuclear energy will occur.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.