From Hiroshima to Fukushima: The political background to the nuclear disaster in Japan

A guest contributor
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Part 1 | Part 2

This is the conclusion of a two-part article on the historical antecedents of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Part 1 was published June 23, 2011.

While Matsutaro Shoriki, the former war criminal, media magnate and head of the Japanese nuclear agency, lost US support and was frustrated in his bid to assume control of the Japanese government, his student and henchmen, Yasuhiro Nakasone, managed to continue his plans.

Nakasone succeeded Shoriki to become head of the Science and Technology Department, then defence minister, and finally prime minister from 1982 to 1987. Nakasone wrote in his memoirs in 1996: "I worked as assistant to Mr. Matsutaro Shoriki, who had been president of the Department of Science and Technology. I wrote all the nuclear energy legislation , i.e. the law establishing the Nuclear Energy Authority, the law promoting the development of nuclear raw materials, the law establishing the Nuclear Research Institute, the law for the Nuclear Fuel Institute ..." (8)

As a young naval officer, Nakasone had been an eyewitness to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. He writes in his autobiography: "I saw the mushroom cloud from my naval operation base in Takamatsu. Intuitively I felt that the future of the nuclear age had begun". (9) It was not the 200,000 people killed in such a gruesome way, nor the agony of slow death for the surviving victims of radiation that interested him. His response was merely to yearn for the coming era of Japan's nuclear power.

Yuko Fujita, professor of physics at Keio University, described Nakasone's role in a paper presented at an annual meeting of the Japanese Physics Society as follows:

"In 1953, he was approached by a Mr. Coulton, an officer of the Counter Intelligence Corps from General Douglas McArthur's headquarters, and invited to attend a seminar at Harvard University, organised by [Henry] Kissinger. After the seminar, Nakasone met with Hideo Yamamoto, a businessman from Asahi Glass and then a student at Columbia University, in order to obtain more information about nuclear technology. Yamamoto said: 'He was particularly interested in nuclear weapons, particularly the development of compact nuclear weapons. Since he was advocate of Japanese rearmament, I assume he saw nuclear weapons as something that was imperative for Japan'". (1)

The beginning of the nuclear programme

Immediately after returning, Nakasone began to prepare a special budget for nuclear research in the form of a supplementary budget. Steering a rapid three-day procedure of coalition negotiations, he managed to push the draft bill through, and it was passed by both houses of parliament by March 4, 1954. Thus, the first nuclear programme in Japan was created with a budget of 235 million yen. (This particular sum was the idea of Nakasone himself. He later said that the number of millions was inspired by the element, uranium 235.)

The haste was necessary because the Japanese trawler's radiation accident during the hydrogen bomb test on the Bikini atoll in March 1954 had recently occurred, although the cutter only returned to Japan 14 days later. The accident was to obsess the Japanese public for years.

Nakasone became head of the the Kishi government's Science and Technology Department in the late 1950s. Like Shoriki, Shinsuke Kishi had been imprisoned as a war criminal, but was freed from prison by the CIA prior to becoming Japanese prime minister. Serving under Kishi, Nakasone became instrumental in the development of the Japanese nuclear power programme.

In his autobiography, Kishi writes about the importance of the nuclear programme: "Nuclear technology can be used for both peaceful and military purposes. (...) Japan may not have nuclear weapons, but it can strengthen its power to wield influence in the international arena, if it increases its potential nuclear weapons capability".

Nakasone was president of the Atomic Energy Authority when it published Japan's first concrete "programme for the long-term development and use of nuclear power" in 1961. Based on this programme, nuclear power plants like Fukushima, came into being. Their reactor blocks were supplied by the US company General Electric, as ready-for-use installations in accordance with the original plans of the CIA. The contracts for building most of the nuclear power plants in Japan went to a single construction company, the Kajima Group, whose boss was a close relative of Nakasone.

While most of the nuclear plants were being built during the early 1970s, Nakasone occupied two ministerial positions: the Ministry for Trade and Industry and the Department of Science and Technology. He was thereby able to fully exploit his power in the fields of both energy management and the nuclear programme.

The ANPO opposition movement

As already mentioned, the introduction of nuclear power was met with widespread rejection by the Japanese population. The traumatic experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War certainly accounted for this. In the 1950s and 1960s, the anti-nuclear movement developed into a mass movement against the US military presence, reaching its climax in the legendary anti-ANPO

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(the Japanese acronym for US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty) struggles. This movement organised what amounted to general strikes against the prolongation of the security pact with the US. The state reacted by launching brutal violence on the part of the police.

Ultimately, all these protest and opposition movements—including the broad student protests in 1968 and 1969—were defeated, because the state and the nuclear lobby were able to rely on the Japanese Communist Party and the trade union leadership to bring the opposition under control and then to betray it. The Communist Party of Japan, which in no sense espoused a genuine socialist programme, initially openly supported the nuclear policy of the state. It exerted great influence especially in the public service, playing a dominant role in the teachers' union, for example.

The state then turned to systematically aligning its education policies with the nuclear programme. Thus, chapters on nuclear power plants were included in the compulsory school books of all schools, in order to firmly plant in children's minds at an early age the idea that nuclear power was a secure form of energy for the future. School textbooks in Japan are controlled by the Ministry of Education and Science, the same ministry that implements the nuclear programme.

Numerous legal and economic measures then led to a direct dependency of the regional municipalities on nuclear power plants.

The military importance of the nuclear power projects

Nuclear power plant operators have exerted great influence on the national government over the years. This has contributed to the fact that the threat of nuclear power to the security of the population goes largely unquestioned. Much more important is the military aspect of nuclear energy policy, which is still extremely topical. In order to demonstrate this, a few facts should finally be discussed.

More than $52 billion has so far been invested in the construction of the two reprocessing plants at Rokkashomura and Tokaimura, and the fast breeder reactor at Monju. The plant and equipment at Rokkashomura alone will end up swallowing up more than $100 billion—an amount exceeding all calculations of economic viability. All of these facilities are located in earthquake and tsunami-prone areas. More than 4,000 tonnes of nuclear material are stored in these plants, i.e., a quantity several times more than sufficient to render the whole country uninhabitable in the event of a Category 7 accident. And there have already been serious accidents in all three facilities (including fatalities in the case of Tokaimura).

All three plants suitable for the manufacture of nuclear weapons are closely connected with the Mitsubishi corporation, Japan's largest weapons producer and manufacturer of ballistic rockets, combat aircraft, guided missiles, warships etc. Mitsubishi has led the development and construction of the facilities.

The head of the operating company for the Tokaimura reprocessing plant, the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute, is Kaneo Niwa, who was previously CEO of Mitsubishi Heavy Industry. His predecessor, Taizo Shoda, was the initiator of the Monju fast breeder. He also came from Mitsubishi Heavy Industry, as did his successor, Yotaro Iida, who headed the board both at Rokkashomura and Tokaimura.

The down-playing of the catastrophe of Fukushima is crucial not only for economic reasons (the issue of the continuing operation of the remaining 54 nuclear power plants); it is also vital for the implementation of the state's military plans for the future.

Fukushima was foreseeable

Twenty years ago, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission warned in its security report NUREG 1150 that the auxiliary equipment of some reactors (such as diesel emergency generators, water storage tanks etc.) would not structurally withstand stresses caused by earthquakes. Such reactors include the Mark I type, like the reactors at Fukushima. The authority warned it was highly probable that the reactors' cooling functions would fail in an earthquake. Japan's nuclear safety authority and the TEPCO reactor operators—responsible for, among others, the reactors at Fukushima—ignored this report.

Hidekatsu Yoshii, a nuclear physicist and lower house deputy, challenged the chairman of the Nuclear Safety Committee during a parliamentary debate in October 2006, as follows: "There is a risk of meltdown due to failure of the cooling systems in 43 nuclear power plants (including Fukushima I), because they are so designed that power transmission lines would be damaged by earthquakes, thereby causing a complete power failure; or the supply of cooling water would be disrupted in the event of large tsunami waves".

In December of the same year, Yoshii again urged the cabinet in writing to take measures to protect the population against nuclear hazards caused by major earthquakes affecting the operation of nuclear power plants. The prime minister at the time, Shinzo Abe (LDP), rejected the request on the grounds that a failure of emergency diesel generators or a failure of the cooling systems of reactors had never occurred in Japan.

Yukinobu Okamura, geologist and director of the National Institute for Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, examined in 2004 the extent of a tsunami disaster that had struck the region of Fukushima in the ninth century. According to his research, the tsunami waves were so big that they caused damage three to four miles inland. In 2009, he reported his findings to a parliamentary committee for earthquake threat to nuclear power plants, urging TEPCO to make security arrangements with respect to the occurrence of large tsunami waves in Fukushima. But TEPCO's response was to claim that the available data was insufficient to justify such precautions.

8) Yasuhiro Nakasone: *50 Years of Postwar Politics*, published by Bungei Shunju, 1996, p. 170

9) Yasuhiro Nakasone: *Politics and Life*, Kodansha Publishers, 1992, p. 75

10) "Military Aspects of Japan's Nuclear Policy", paper presented at the annual meeting of the Japanese Physical Society, 2004

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