



# Nuclear Policy Gridlock in Japan

## BOTTOM LINES

- **A Half Century of Nuclear Policy Continuity.** Ever since the 1950s, Japan has consistently pursued a complete nuclear fuel cycle, but it has just as consistently abstained from building nuclear weapons.
- **Japan's Large Number of Nuclear Veto Players.** Japan's remarkable nuclear policy stability is in large measure the result of the de facto veto power that the top political leadership, major state bureaucracies, private companies, and prefectural governors all exercise over major policy shifts.
- **An Extreme Case, but a Common Phenomenon.** Many advanced industrialized democracies have numerous nuclear veto players. Therefore, major nuclear policy shifts in these countries are likely to be rare, gradual, and openly debated.

By Jacques E.C. Hymans

*This policy brief is based on "Veto Players, Nuclear Energy, and Nonproliferation: Domestic Institutional Barriers to a Japanese Bomb," which appears in the fall 2011 issue of International Security.*

## WHITHER JAPANESE NUCLEAR POLICY?

Prior to the Japanese earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011, international observers frequently posed the question of whether Japan might convert its large stockpile of plutonium into nuclear weapons. Since March 11, their main question has shifted to whether Japan will decide to exit from the nuclear energy field altogether.

Top Japanese politicians have encouraged both lines of speculation. In the wake of North Korea's nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009, some high-ranking members of the then-ruling Liberal Democratic Party quietly argued for a Japanese nuclear arsenal to deter Pyongyang. By contrast, after months of attempting to contain the fallout from the damaged Fukushima

Dai-Ichi nuclear complex, Prime Minister Naoto Kan delivered a speech on July 14 declaring his intention to wean Japan off its dependence on nuclear energy. Japan's prime minister since September 2011, the Kan ally Yoshihiko Noda has gingerly backed away from his predecessor's position and seems instead to be embracing a policy of muddling through.

Even though the political winds in Japan have become quite changeable over the past decade, the country's traditional nuclear policy mix of "no to nuclear weapons, yes to nuclear energy" is likely to persist for many years to come. The principal reason why such a forecast can be made with confidence is that the Japanese nuclear policymaking arena is replete with veto players that are institutionally well positioned to block nuclear policy upheavals that they perceive as harmful to their self-interest. The existence of such a large number of veto players greatly reduces the chances for radical nuclear policy change, and it virtually eliminates the chances for any such change to occur secretly or suddenly.

Japan's stockpile of 30-plus tons of plutonium is therefore much less of a proliferation risk than many experts have claimed. Moreover, it is wrong to interpret Japan's nuclear policy as an implicit nuclear weapons "hedge." How technically "close" a country may be to having a bomb does not matter much if it is virtually institutionally incapable of mustering a political decision to cross that threshold.

## THE PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR VETO PLAYERS IN JAPAN

Forecasts of a country's nuclear proliferation tendencies are often based on analyses of how its top political leadership perceives the international strategic situation. That is a good place to start, because the top political leadership's nuclear policy preferences will undoubtedly matter a great deal. The analysis should not stop there, however, especially in the case of Japan. The reason is that top Japanese politicians have significantly less personal authority over nuclear policy than, for instance, their counterparts in India.

In India, authority over nuclear policy has always been steeply pyramidal: essentially, what the prime minister says goes. In 1998 this pyramidal institutional setup allowed newly elected Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to make a secret, unilateral decision to reverse decades of settled policy by inducting nuclear weapons into India's arsenal.

In Japan, however, authority over nuclear policy is highly fractured. There are many veto players in the Japanese nuclear policymaking arena, any one of which can pose a giant obstacle to major policy changes. In addition to the prime minister, Japan's nuclear veto players include the following:

- The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, an extraordinarily powerful state bureaucracy that sets Japan's overall energy strategy, controls the licensing process for nuclear plants, and has been on the front line for nuclear safety;
- The privately held electrical utilities, including the enormous Tokyo Electric Power Company, which not only own most of Japan's nuclear facilities and

plutonium stockpile, but also have an institutionalized oversight role regarding Japan's state nuclear activities;

- The heavy equipment manufacturers, including too-big-to-fail Toshiba, Hitachi, and Mitsubishi, which have been responsible for virtually all nuclear construction in Japan, including the country's proliferation-sensitive fuel-cycle facilities, and have made big bets on the success of the incipient global nuclear energy renaissance;
- The Atomic Energy Commission, the institution with the statutory authority to set long-term Japanese nuclear policy, whose full-time members have an autonomous status akin to the governors of a central bank;
- Provincial ("prefectural") governors, who are in a position to pass judgment on proposals for construction, alteration, or operation of nuclear facilities in their domains independent of the national-level authorities.

It is a standard assumption in political science that veto players, once established, are almost impossible to sideline. Reflecting this, the number of Japanese nuclear veto players has continuously expanded over time. There were three veto players in the 1960s, four in the 1970s, five in the 1990s, and six in the 2000s. Moreover, in response to the Fukushima disaster, the government has made strides toward turning the nuclear safety bureaucracy into a truly independent actor by attaching it to the Ministry of the Environment—thus potentially producing yet another veto player in the Japanese nuclear policymaking arena.

This large number of veto players raises incredibly high hurdles for would-be Japanese nuclear policy reformers. Indeed, Japanese nuclear policy has not changed in its essentials since its initial development in the 1950s. The policy has persisted even in the face of major shocks, such as North Korea's nuclear tests and, so far at least, the Fukushima accident.

It is a mistake to attribute this amazing level of policy stability to the supposed single-minded unity of the

Japanese “nuclear village” of politicians, bureaucrats, and corporate executives. In fact, over time, various institutional members of the nuclear village have expressed strong (if not always public) opposition to key pillars of the traditional policy. Yet they have found it difficult to make headway, given the objections of the others. Therefore, the traditional policy carries on not because the key actors all actually believe in it, but rather because they disagree over what to replace it with—and because they profoundly distrust one another.

The diffusion of power in Japan’s nuclear policymaking arena was laid bare by the utter failure of the attempt by then-Prime Minister Kan to lead Japan out of the nuclear field. Despite wide public support, Kan’s initiative was torpedoed within just a few hours of his dramatic July 14 speech, and he had to clarify that his words merely reflected his “personal opinion.” There could hardly be a clearer demonstration of the limits of prime ministerial power.

## THE PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR VETO PLAYERS BEYOND JAPAN

The historical growth in the number and variety of Japanese nuclear veto players has made the country an extreme case of stasis in fundamental nuclear

policies. Japan is not the only country to experience this phenomenon, however. In many advanced industrialized democracies, the old Manhattan Project model of top-down, centralized, and secretive nuclear institutions has gradually given way to more complex arrangements. And as a general rule, the more numerous the veto players, the harder the struggle to achieve major nuclear policy change.

Nuclear policy gridlock is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it can impede potentially necessary changes of direction. On the other hand, it poses a serious obstacle to potentially disastrous political flights of fancy. Those who bemoan the “sclerosis” of nuclear policymaking in many advanced industrialized states should be careful what they wish for.

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*Statements and views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.*

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