

Tritium Troubles: The Politics of Fukushima's Treated Water Release in the Asia-Pacific and Beyond

by Aurelio Insisa

Following approval from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Japan has begun to release into the Pacific Ocean treated radioactive water from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant on 24 August. The power plant was the site of the nuclear disaster that occurred on 11 March 2011 as a consequence of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Water has been continuously pumped into the nuclear power plant to cool down the reactors' fuel rods since the disaster. However, current treatment methods are unable to eliminate tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, resulting in the storage of tons of contaminated water in thousands of tanks on site. The current plans consequently entail the release of more than a million tons of tritium-contaminated water. The Japanese authorities, the IAEA and a majority of scientists concur that the concentration of tritium in the stored water falls within the safety limits.¹ Nevertheless, the release of

water containing tritium from the site has encountered opposition from environmental activists and ordinary citizens within and outside Japan. It has also faced criticism from a minority of scientists who argue that the consequences of the release remain unpredictable.

This cross-border measure has highlighted, and somehow even exacerbated, political tensions in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, it has occurred within a regional political order that remains in flux, featuring rampant competition between the US and China, Japan's own ongoing overhaul of national defence and a consequential tilt in the foreign policy of South Korea after the 2022 elections in favour of Washington and Tokyo. Furthermore, the media clamour surrounding the water release has also extended beyond the region, fuelling the public debate on nuclear energy in several Western countries, including Italy.

¹ Navin Singh Khadka, "The Science Behind the Fukushima Waste Water Release", in *BBC News*,

26 August 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66610977>.

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China's "moral superiority"

After the announcement of the release operations, the Chinese government banned the import of all seafood from Japan. The authorities in Beijing cited risks of radioactive contamination of "food safety", and condemned Tokyo for the "extremely selfish and irresponsible act in disregard of the global public interest".² To be sure, critics pointed out that the Fuqing nuclear power plant in the Fujian province in Southeast China releases water containing higher levels of tritium than that released from Fukushima. This was swiftly countered by the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, who stated that operations in Fuqing and Fukushima "are different in nature, come from different sources and require different levels of sophistication to handle", further adding that Japan had "turned itself into a saboteur of the ecological system and polluter of the ocean".³

² China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Statement on the Japanese Government's Start of Releasing Fukushima Nuclear-Contaminated Water into the Ocean*, 24 August 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/202308/t20230824_11131325.html.

³ Amy Hawkins and Justin McCurry, "Fukushima: China Accused of Hypocrisy over Its Own Release of Wastewater from Nuclear Plants", in *The Guardian*, 25 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/zm6qe>. See: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on August 23, 2023*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202308/t20230823_11130960.html; and *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on August 24, 2023*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202308/t20230824_11132299.html.

Predictably, the vocal protests from Chinese authorities and state media have been accompanied by a chorus of anti-Japanese and nationalist voices on Sinoophone social media networks.

The use of harsh language and the adoption of import bans evoke memories, albeit to a lesser degree, of the previous *nadir* of Sino-Japanese relations in the first half of the 2010s, following Tokyo's nationalisation of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Broader dynamics of domestic and international politics explain the intensity of the Chinese response at this turn. On the one hand, it is possible to see a "rally 'round the flag" dynamic aiming to foster social cohesion by inciting nationalism against Japan at a time when China faces economic headwinds, if not the end of its "economic miracle" altogether.⁴ On the other hand, Tokyo's decision to release Fukushima's treated water provides Beijing with an opportunity to vocally signal dissatisfaction with the current course in regional politics of the administration led by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, thus asserting a position of moral superiority by depicting Japan as a rogue disruptor of the international order.

Watering down Japan–South Korea relations?

In 2022, the Japanese administration led by Kishida, continuing the policies of the late Abe Shinzo, kickstarted the "most substantive overhaul of Japan's

⁴ Adam S. Posen, "The End of China's Economic Miracle", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 5 (September/October 2023), p. 120-132, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1130557>.

defence capabilities since the 1980s”⁵. This transformation, addressing Chinese, North Korean and Russian perceived challenges to the regional status quo, seeks to increase defence spending to NATO level, acquire counterstrike missile capabilities and overcome the civil-military divide in defence matters. This year, Tokyo found a sympathetic partner in the conservative administration of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol. Tokyo achieved a diplomatic breakthrough in a bilateral relation plagued by history and identity issues with Yoon’s own visit to Japan. Moreover, shortly before the announcement of the treated water release, Kishida and Yoon joined US President Joe Biden in a historical trilateral meeting at Camp David, hinting at a potential shift from the traditional “hub and spoke” system of US alliances in the Asia-Pacific to a new network featuring increasing coordination among partners⁶ – a development that, in turn, inevitably raises the spectre of an “Asian NATO”, one of Beijing’s *bêtes noires*.

Seoul’s new course in relations with Tokyo, however, is arguably the byproduct of the country’s institutional framework, which provides wide

latitude in foreign policy-making to the presidency. Attitudes toward Japan remain one of the key sources of polarisation in South Korean politics, and the new foreign policy course has exposed Yoon to fierce criticism at home. Even though the administration has stated that it “neither supports nor endorses the release” of tritium-containing water from Fukushima, protests against *both* Yoon and Japan immediately erupted.⁷ Multiple rallies organised by civic groups and supported by parliamentarians of the opposition Democratic Party of Korea have taken place in recent weeks, and a sharp downturn in the consumption of seafood has affected local businesses since the first water release, further increasing pressure on the presidential administration. In short, the decision to release water from Fukushima has highlighted the extreme fragility of the current alignment between the two countries.

The debate beyond the Asia-Pacific

The politics of the Fukushima water discharge, however, has not been limited to the chancelleries of the Asia-Pacific. Traditional and new media, as well as public opinions, have participated in the debate, not only fanning the flames of nationalist politics, but also providing inputs that state actors must consider. In Europe, indeed, the recent Fukushima events have been a matter mainly concerning public opinions and domestic debates

⁵ Corey Wallace and Giulio Pugliese, “Japan 2022: Putin and Abe Shocks Thwart Kishida’s Enjoyment of Three Golden Years Despite Major Defence Overhaul”, in *Asia Maior*, Vol. 33/2022 (2023), p. 79-129 at p. 96, <https://www.asiamaior.org/?p=1708>.

⁶ Christopher B. Johnstone and Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Separate U.S. Alliances in East Asia Are Obsolete”, in *Foreign Policy*, 11 September 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/japan-south-korea-us-alliance-china-security-east-asia-defense-geopolitics-biden-kishida-suk-yeol>.

⁷ Steven Borowiec, “Yoon Dines on Seafood as Fukushima Discharge Divides South Korea”, in *Nikkei Asia*, 30 August 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Yoon-dines-on-seafood-as-Fukushima-discharge-divides-South-Korea>.

about civilian nuclear energy. Italy – which was the largest European country without nuclear power plants prior to the recent phase-out in Germany – is a case in point. Legacy media in the country, which still dominate the national landscape,⁸ have generally covered the issue from a narrow perspective. They have relayed Chinese official statements and criticism of Japan at face value, and emphasised the concerns of activists, scientists and ordinary people opposing the water release. This approach, however, is not per se driven by an anti-Japanese or pro-Chinese bias. Rather, it is primarily the result of a mixture of sensationalism and scepticism regarding nuclear energy matters, borne out of a wide popular opposition to the civilian use of nuclear power, as proved by the result of the referenda held in 1987 and 2011.

This orientation, however, seems to have recently undergone a significant shift as a result of the current cost-of-life crisis and the country's efforts to diversify energy imports after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁹ Italian media appeared to have lagged behind a shifting political landscape that now features an emerging polarisation on the issue: while right-wing parties in the governing coalition (in particular Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's *Lega*) publicly endorse nuclear power, opposition parties such as the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party are opposed to it. In Italy and

beyond, this emerging polarisation on civilian nuclear energy may push future reporting on Fukushima or other nuclear-related issues along distinct partisan lines, highlighting the politicisation of the debate on the matter in Europe as well.

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⁸ Alessio Cornia, "Italy", in *2023 Digital News Report*, 14 June 2023, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/node/5885>.

⁹ IZI, *Nucleare, ritorno al futuro. Il sondaggio che rileva le posizioni degli elettori*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.izi.it/?p=3091>.

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