



Japan Returns to Nuclear Power to Secure Energy Reserves

SINGAPORE — Japan will reopen more existing unused nuclear power plants and explore improving next-generation reactors, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced on Wednesday (August 24). The prime minister's comments smooth the way for a key policy rethink on nuclear energy 10 years after the Fukushima disaster.

Kishida further indicated that the government would consider prolonging the lifespan of existing reactors, as the crisis in Ukraine and escalating energy costs have forced both shifts in public opinion as well as policy transitions on nuclear power.



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Ikata nuclear power plant (Ehime Prefecture) in Japan

Government officials convened Wednesday to develop a plan for so-called green transformation in order for Japan to meet environmental goals.

Some members of the government regard nuclear energy as an important aspect for such “green transformation,” despite nuclear energy facing opposition by the public following the Fukushima disaster.

Moreover, with rising fuel prices and a sweltering hot summer this year, the tide of public opinion has turned in favor of nuclear energy.

At the same meeting on the topic of “green transformation,” Kishida said that Japan plans to restart seven more nuclear reactors. Once these additional reactors are restarted, the number of reactors brought back online since the 2011 Fukushima crisis would reach 17 out of a total 33 operable units. “Nuclear power and renewables are essential to proceed with a green transformation,” Kishida reasoned. “Russia’s invasion changed the global energy situation.”

These seven additional reactors are the No. 6 and No. 7 reactors at Tokyo Electric Power Company Holding’s Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant, the No. 2 reactor at Tohoku Electric Power’s Onagawa plant, the No. 1 and No. 2 reactors at Kansai Electric Power’s Takahama plant, the No. 2 reactor at Chugoku Electric Power’s Shimane plant, and the No. 2 reactor at Japan Atomic Power’s Tokai No. 2 plant. Of these reactors, the Takahama, Onagawa, and Shimane reactors have already been granted local permission to return online. These reactors would be able to restart after the completion of safety measures.

The government also indicated its desire to spearhead grassroots efforts to garner local approval to restart the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa and Tokai reactors.

Also, Kishida encouraged policymakers to deliberate on “constructing next-generation nuclear reactors equipped with new safety mechanisms” as well as “making maximum use of existing nuclear plants.”

“Please accelerate your discussions on all possible measures, based on opinions from ruling and



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on August 24, 2022

opposition parties as well as experts, so you can reach concrete conclusions by the end of the year,” Kishida expressed.

In July, Industry Minister Koichi Hagiuda announced that the government planned to restart more nuclear reactors to pre-empt any power shortage in the winter. Japan hopes to restart four more nuclear reactors in time to avert any power crunch over the winter.

Hagiuda said, “We would like to ensure the operation of a maximum of nine reactors, up from the current five operating now, by revising the construction and inspection periods for some of the nuclear power plants.”

Ever since a huge earthquake and tsunami in 2011 destroyed the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, Japan has shut down the majority of its nuclear plants. At the time of the crisis in 2011, Japan had 54 operating nuclear reactors supplying more than 30 percent of its electricity. Due to the nuclear disaster, utilities began closing their reactors down. In 2012, prime minister Noda Yoshihiko’s government unveiled a plan to eradicate all nuclear power by 2040 in a seeming nod to public pressure immediately following the Fukushima crisis.

Nonetheless, the Abe premiership that succeeded Noda’s government indicated in 2016 that Japan “cannot do without” nuclear power.

The momentum to reopen the reactors could get more public support after the governing coalition attained a victory in the Upper House elections in July 2022. Furthermore, 2022 was the first year indicating [rising popular support](#) for the restarting of nuclear plants, based on a poll released in March 2022 by the Japanese outlet Nikkei, owing to an energy crisis sparked by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The March 2022 poll revealed that 53 percent of respondents were in favor of restarting nuclear power plants, compared to only 44 percent in a similar poll conducted in September 2021.

As of late July, Japan had seven operating reactors, with three others undergoing maintenance and remaining offline. Many other reactors are undergoing a re-licensing process under more draconian safety standards following the Fukushima crisis.

Japan’s return to nuclear energy appears to be a strategic move by the resource-poor country to eschew further strains on its power grids. In the face of escalating energy prices, unprecedented heat waves in the summer of 2022, and a vulnerable global energy market, Kishida’s announcement could not have been more timely.



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