Seoul Continues to be Hysterical while Tokyo Digs a Fukushima Water Tunnel

On August 25, 2021, South Korea expressed “strong regret” that Japan was unilaterally implementing its plan to release radioactive water from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant “without any prior consultations or seeking consent from the South Korean government”. Oh, my gosh - Tokyo Electric Power Company Holding Inc. (TEPCO) has unveiled a preliminary construction plan of an undersea tunnel to release radioactive water from the plant. The length of the tunnel planned to be built near the plant’s destroyed reactor will be one kilometer, and the place of water release will be outside the fishery area.

According to Koo Yun-cheol, Minister for Government Policy Coordination in South Korea, Japan should “immediately halt” its plan to release radioactive water into the sea and “consult and communicate sufficiently beforehand” with neighboring countries. South Korea’s Foreign Ministry expressed disapproval to Makoto Hayashi, minister plenipotentiary at the embassy in Seoul.

We have repeatedly written that Anti-Japaneseism is one of the key pillars of South Korean ideology. One of the culture war front sections is related to the inflated scare stories that “Japan will soon discharge contaminated water
from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the ocean,” especially after the Japanese government announced plans in April 2021 to release contaminated water in the spring of 2023, as all water storage tanks would be full as early as the fall of 2022.

It sounds pretty scary because the defaulting creates the picture of the one-time discharge of 1.25 million tons of raw water used to cool the reactor. The situation is somewhat different, as we wrote about in detail in a previous article on this subject. Most of the radioactive elements in the water have been removed, and only radioactive tritium remains, the consequences of which are considered somewhat controversial and need to be further investigated. Then, there is no talking about a one-time release, but that in 2 years, when the water storage tanks are finally full, Japan will start to release water in a “thin trickle” so that the contaminated water will not harm anyone. Thirdly, the IAEA has reviewed the Japanese water discharge plan and found nothing dangerous.

In such a situation, South Korea can’t help but continue the hysteria going on since April when the first reports came in and the decision to release the water was finally made. This is done on several fronts.

First, the Japanese side is constantly being asked to “reveal the truth.” Although Tokyo is actively sharing information, it is not complete from South Korea’s point of view. The constant demand for more information must give the impression that Tokyo is not telling the whole story. And if the Japanese claim that everything has already been told and shown, it only proves that they are being devious. Therefore, on April 19, South Korea’s foreign minister said that if Japan follows the due processes under the standards of IAEA, South Korea has no particular reason to object. But Japan must meet three conditions: provide sufficient scientific evidence and information, share such information sufficiently in advance, consult more sufficiently in advance, and guarantee South Korea’s participation in IAEA’s safety verification process.

A panel of experts from the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute called on Japan to withdraw its decision, calling for more information.

In June 2021, the said institute punished its employee surnamed Hwang, who published a report without management approval stating that the discharge of contaminated water would have only a minor impact on Korea. The expert dared to write that if all this water is quietly poured into the ocean over a period of one year, it will give a radiation dose of only one to three hundred millionths of the annual limit allowed for humans. By the time the current carried the contaminated water to Korea, it would already be safe.

Japan, however, had nothing against it from the start: On April 19, the Japanese Ambassador to South Korea, Koichi Aiboshisaid, stated that he believed South Korean experts could be part of the UN-led team, but that this was a matter to be consulted on between the IAEA and the South Korean government.

On September 9, Lydie Evrard, IAEA Deputy Director General and Head of the Department of Nuclear Safety and Security, said that the IAEA would include South Korea and China in a team to assess the release of radioactive water from the crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant. In addition, the IAEA will send an 11-member expert team to Japan in late 2021 to review the planned water release. It will comprise representatives from different countries, including South Korea. According to Lydie Evrard, the process of releasing water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the ocean is under preparation and could take several years. Therefore, the IAEA will continue to provide the necessary support in this matter.

But one has to understand what these experts are going to do. IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi shares the concerns of countries neighboring Japan but stresses that the role of the expert group is not to assess the condition of discharged water but to verify that the discharge procedure meets international standards and inform the public.

On the one hand, South Korea actively demanded the inclusion of South Korean experts in the IAEA’s international group of experts. On the other hand, it is openly stated that the IAEA needs additional commissions in parallel, as the “Korean voice” may not be heard. As Yang Ki-ho, a professor of Japanese studies at Sungkonghoe University, said, “We need to remain cautious about joining an IAEA investigation team. If Japan tampers with data and the IAEA team comes up with results favorable to Tokyo, we would not be able to reject it.”

The second area is the use of a variety of NGOs. Such are less bound by the knowledge of the situation and common sense, declaring the horrors of the ecological catastrophe that Japan is experiencing and getting ready to sue the country. However, the real harmful consequences will become clear only two years later, when it will be possible to analyze the results of the first discharges.
There were a lot of voices in April. South Korean fishermen protested right at sea by raising flags with crossed-out nuclear power plant symbols and skulls. A group of progressive university students held a sit-in protest in front of the Japanese embassy for four days straight and then shaved their heads in protest against Japan.

One of the country’s largest women’s organizations, the YWCA, has called on the Japanese government to immediately abandon its plan to dump contaminated water into the sea. They condemned Tokyo’s planned release of radioactive water as a criminal act that would ultimately lead to the death of all humanity.

On April 22, members of the Korea Federation for Environmental Movements said they filed a lawsuit against the nuclear power plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. with the Busan District Court: “If the radioactive water is sent out to the ocean, it could reach the waters off Busan, threaten the safety of its citizens and damage their properties by polluting fish and seafood.” The goal is to get a court injunction to stop the release of water, and then under the civil code of the ROK to get each plaintiff 10 million won ($8,960).

Later, the situation did not change. Professor Seo Kyung-duk of Sungshin Women’s University, known as a fighter against Chinese cultural influence, has launched an online campaign urging Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso to drink wastewater from the disabled Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, uploading a poster of Aso holding a glass of water with text reading “You drink first!”

On August 27, several NGOs, including the Korean Federation for Environmental Movements and Korea Radiation Watch, held a joint press conference in Seoul to warn of the serious environmental problems resulting from the discharge of contaminated water through the undersea tunnel. “If radioactive wastewater is discharged through an undersea tunnel, more serious problems will occur in marine ecosystems.” “Radioactive materials will spread much wider and faster in the Pacific Ocean, resulting in unpredictable pollution.”

There are several reasons for that. Reminders that the Japanese haven’t changed and are plotting something scary is an excellent way to switch from internal problems. Moreover, the issue of women for comfort is squeezed almost dry. To make matters worse, grandmothers continue to die, and the scandals of how the community organizations concerned embezzled money meant for them have been swept under the rug and have not entirely subsided. And even the attempt to spin the issue of forcibly displaced workers in parallel is increasingly starting to fail. Whereas earlier South Korean courts actively stampeded lawsuits based on which Seoul had the right (as it believed) to seize Japanese assets, more and more often, courts are issuing inconvenient decisions for “patriots,” daring to refer to international law. But the Fukushima issue fits well with fears of an environmental crisis, especially since Tokyo cannot say that its proposed option is 100% safe.

That’s why the pressure is in the public sphere, not in the official one. Although the Moon administration promised to refer the issue to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, it has not done so. Perhaps the point is that several Japanese politicians have written that “the amount of tritium released from the Korean nuclear power plant is greater than Japan’s.” Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato said in a press conference April 13 that “nuclear plants in Korea, China and Taiwan are also releasing wastewater containing tritium”, after which it became clear that, in line with this, Japan would be urging Korea and China to reveal confidential data on their radioactive waste.

There is no hope for the US position either. On April 18, US Presidential Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry expressed confidence that the Japanese government had conducted comprehensive consultations with the IAEA before deciding to discharge the water. John Kerry later said it was “inappropriate” to the American side “to interfere” with this environmental issue. The South Korean media, of course, writes that “Biden administration supports Japan for political reasons.” They include the fact that Tokyo is perceived as a more important ally than Seoul and, as Yang Ki Ho believes, it has to do with US decades-long involvement in the building of Japanese nuclear power plants.

But how true is what the Korea Times wrote: “Following Japan’s decision to dump contaminated water from the destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea, soured relations between Korea and Japan are sinking deeper into the abyss”? Noise is noise, but in terms of facts, despite claims of victory in the trade war, it was Seoul that started to back down. Read the following materials on this topic to find out exactly how.

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