

EUROPEAN THEATRE

The Nuclear Debate Returns

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The nuclear disaster which is unwinding in Japan has quickly refueled debate in Europe over the risks associated with production of nuclear energy. Immediately after the disaster in the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear complex along Japan's east coast began, Western nuclear experts still tried to pacify public worries. It was for instance argued that the accident involving failures of the cooling systems in several of Fukushima's nuclear reactors, could in no way be compared with the disaster that earlier took place in Chernobyl, in the former Soviet Union. The explosion and meltdown of one of Chernobyl's nuclear reactors in 1986 admittedly engendered worldwide opposition against civilian nuclear production. But there was no question of a repeat. Instead, the experts argued—the Fukushima-Daiichi accidents could at most be compared with the 1979 accident on Three Mile Island in the US. The latter was a case of a partial meltdown, with largely localized consequences. Yet as events have rapidly unfolded in Japan, the debate over the wisdom of reliance on the nuclear sector has been resumed all over (Western) Europe. Even before high levels of radioactivity were registered outside the Fukushima nuclear complex, above the permitted maximum, politicians both at the European and at national levels had already started drawing concrete consequences.

Outright dramatic were the reactions registered in Germany. Europe's most powerful state is for an estimated 28 percent of its electricity supply dependent on nuclear energy, and has for long witnessed intense resistance against nuclear production. Thus even as public protests in other parts of Western Europe largely died down in the 1990s, German activists continued staging blockades and other forms of civil disobedience. Repeatedly, large groups of activists for instance enchained themselves physically to railway lines, so as to obstruct the transportation of vessels containing nuclear waste. Germany also was the first large European country which officially decided to abandon plans for construction of new nuclear plants. This happened in a period when the German Green Party participated in the country's government, alongside the more powerful Social Democratic Party (SPD). Noticeable further is the fact that a section of Germany's business community with remarkable frankness had started admitting that the question of final deposition, of high-level and other dangerous nuclear waste, simply cannot be resolved, and that continuance of any nuclear experiments is therefore irresponsible. During the rule of the former chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (SPD), discussions among German politicians increasingly revolved around who should bear the expenditures for dismantlement of existing nuclear facilities. A major section of politicians argued that they should be borne by the owners of the nuclear plants themselves.

Germany's current Chancellor, Angela Merckel, who represents the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), last year gave in to mounting pressure leveled by the nuclear lobby. But within days after the beginning of the disaster in Japan she has been forced to completely change gear! First, on Saturday March the 13th, i.e. on the day after the news broke regarding the problems with cooling systems in one of Fukushima's reactors, thousands of demonstrators marched to demand the closure of one of Germany's older nuclear plants, Neckarwestheim 1. The demonstration was preplanned, but in the wake of the disaster in Japan not the expected 60 thousand people turned up, but a reported 100 thousand. And Chancellor Merckel was quick to take due note. First, she rethought the decision which she had taken in September last, namely that the 'life'-time of all existing nuclear plants should be extended.

Instead, she now declared a moratorium and suspended her own decision to prolong Germany's reliance on nuclear energy. Subsequently, on the very day when news came in from Japan regarding the leakage of radioactivity, the German government took a further step. It now announced the immediate closure of all older nuclear plants, i.e. plants that had been constructed before 1980. By this time, opponents of nuclear energy had already held processions in scores of German cities. Given the speed with which Merckel has staged her turn-about, it can safely be concluded that the disaster in Japan has foreclosed possibilities of a nuclear renaissance in Germany.

However, Germany is not the only country where controversies over nuclear production have been revived. The same counts for instance for Switzerland, Germany's smaller neighbour. Switzerland is for a reported 39 percent of its electricity supply dependent on nuclear energy. On March 14, the Swiss Minister of the Environment, Doris Leuthard, announced that all procedures for permission to build three new nuclear plants stood suspended. This opens the possibility that Switzerland will not proceed with plans for the renewal of existing nuclear production facilities. And a fierce controversy has also erupted in France, the Western European country which is most nuclear-dependent of all: nuclear energy provides as much as 79 percent of France's total electricity supply. After France's President Sarkozy came to power several years back, the government initiated a round-table with the country's leading environmental organizations, notably focusing on ways to fight climate change. The round table contributed towards the drafting of new legislative measures, such as introduction of a carbon tax. But it reportedly failed to address the nuclear issue. Yet according to France's leading daily *Le Monde*, the country's politicians now have started crossing swords over France's overwhelming nuclear dependence. Thus, the French industry minister, Eric Besson, is being criticized for having stated on March 11, that the Japanese nuclear accident has 'nothing in common with Chernobyl'. The renowned European Green leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit immediately took him to task for repeating past errors, stating that similar attempts had been made after Chernobyl to belittle the disaster and its consequences. Cohn-Bendit has demanded that France should hold a public referendum on staging a 'nuclear exit'.

Surely, it is too early to draw a balancesheet regarding the Japanese nuclear disaster, or about its consequences for the fate of nuclear production worldwide. Nevertheless, one thing can already be stated with confidence. In Europe, the attempts to stage a nuclear renaissance are facing a major setback. Whereas earlier the debate on nuclear energy had reached a stalemate in several European countries, putting a break on construction (or exportation) of new nuclear reactors, serious pressure towards resumption of construction had been building up over the past years. With hindsight, it may be argued that proponents of nuclear energy basically engaged in horse trading. Arguing that the risks of a climate catastrophe needed to be pre-empted, they advised European governments there was no other choice but to agree on expanding the generation of nuclear energy. Presumably, issues regarding nuclear safety had meanwhile been resolved, and nuclear wastes were a lesser evil than accumulation of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere. Now, at a time when Japan is facing its worst ever nuclear accident in history – an accident that makes all previous nuclear accidents in Japan look pale in comparison, the circle has come full round. No longer can it be argued that the critics who insisted that the possibility of major nuclear accidents can never be excluded, were wrong. The German government of Angela Merckel in any case seems to have made up its mind. □