



***JAPAN'S WASTEWATER RELEASE  
COULD BRING THE REGION  
TOGETHER***

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The first rule of holes is: If you find yourself in one, stop digging.

Viewed most charitably, China may finally be putting its shovel down and searching for a way to fix the mess created by banning the import of all marine products from Japan once it started releasing treated radioactive water from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly agreed on Nov. 17 in San Francisco, where they met at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, to "find ways to resolve the dispute through meetings and dialogue in a constructive manner." Scientific experts will discuss the release but there is still no timetable for lifting the

ban. Moreover, China is withholding overdue payments to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in an apparent attempt to further pressure Japan.

The face-to-face session between the leaders, while not much, could nonetheless be the starting point of a deal. Japan and China should think bigger, however, and seize the opportunity to create a radiation monitoring system. This could serve as a confidence-building measure for the two countries and become the cornerstone of a regional initiative. It's a long shot but it's possible.

This isn't unprecedented. Over two decades ago, Japan, China and several other Asia-Pacific countries created the Nuclear Transparency in the Asia Pacific website as a "one-stop shop" for nuclear energy radiation information. (Full disclosure: we were among the architects of that program.) That effort should guide Tokyo and Beijing as they look for a way out of the current impasse.

Japan has accumulated over a million tons of wastewater from daily efforts to cool debris created by the 2011 meltdowns at the Fukushima nuclear facility (and from rain and groundwater). The roughly 1,000 storage tanks that hold the water are almost full. More tanks can't be installed as the land is needed for other aspects of the plant's decommissioning.

Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings Inc. (Tepco), the plant operator, devised a plan to decontaminate the water that would put it well within national and global safety standards, and then release it about 1 km offshore from the facility. The treatment eliminates radioactive materials other than tritium and reduces the tritium concentration to 1,500 becquerels (Bq) per liter; 60,000 Bq per liter is the Japanese regulatory standard and 10,000 Bq per liter is the World Health Organization standard for drinking water. The plan was assessed and approved by the IAEA and other third parties.

Thus far, there have been three releases, the third ending last week, totaling some 24,000 tons of water. (The entire process is expected to take decades.) Monitoring by Tepco, the Japanese government and

the IAEA indicates that radiation levels remain well below national and international thresholds.

That hasn't stopped China. Beijing has been leading the chorus of complaints about the discharge, calling it an "extremely selfish and irresponsible act that disregards the international public interest" and reportedly turned down opportunities to discuss the plan with Japanese scientists. It has accused Tokyo of being "a saboteur of the ecological system and polluter of the ocean" and imposed an immediate ban on all aquatic products imported from Japan to "prevent the risk of radioactive contamination of food."

Pot, meet kettle: China's own nuclear plants routinely release even more radioactive tritium into the ocean; in at least one case, 10 times as much, but still within allowable limits. In fact, for over six decades, nuclear power plants the world over have routinely discharged water containing tritium without harm to people or the environment, most at higher levels than the 22 trillion Bq per year planned for Fukushima.

In short, there is no scientific basis for Beijing's accusations and actions. We can speculate that China seeks to put Japan on the defensive, to create a rallying point against what has become a formidable opponent of Beijing's diplomacy and to put economic pressure on Japan. China, with Hong Kong, is the biggest single market for Japanese seafood exporters, with the value of this market hitting ¥162.6 billion last year, or 42% of total overseas sales. Getting Tokyo to change course would be a big victory for China.

Let's put that aside, however, and focus on a win-win future scenario. The two governments could create a joint, scientific monitoring group to assess radiation levels at the Fukushima plant, with the intent of extending that effort to all nuclear reactors that the two countries operate and then to the entire region.

Over two decades ago, East Asian nuclear energy producers cooperated to reassure their publics about the industry's safety. Working with Tepco and with invaluable support from the United States Department of Energy's Cooperative Monitoring Center, the multinational nongovernmental Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) created the

aforementioned nuclear transparency website. The portal contained facts, figures and, in most cases, real-time radiation monitoring data related to nuclear energy production for almost all regional producers.

Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan and even Russia participated in the effort. As secretariat for CSCAP's U.S. member committee, Pacific Forum (with which we both continue to be affiliated) established a Nuclear Energy Experts Group that helped put the website together, and forge a community of scientists and nuclear policy experts to address problems of regional concern. We visited nuclear facilities all over the region, and engaged in deep and probing conversations about the most important issues surrounding nuclear energy, including waste disposal — a problem that has yet to be solved.

While our effort was track-two, or nongovernmental, it would be most valuable to move this work to the official level (although it is likely easiest to start with track-two work and migrate upward). A focus on Northeast Asia makes sense, given South Korea's reliance on nuclear energy. Perhaps the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral could give this effort a home, which could then expand to the Plus Three framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, known as ASEAN (which spawned the "plus three" group), if Southeast Asia ever follows through on its nuclear plans.

Rather than disingenuously trying to score cheap points at Tokyo's expense, China could pursue a win-win solution by participating in a cooperative monitoring program that reassures the international community (and seafood-buying consumers) of the safety of wastewater discharges and nuclear energy production in general. It has been reported that Beijing's foreign minister, Wang Yi, asked Natsuo Yamaguchi, head of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party junior coalition partner Komeito, who was visiting China last week, to "provide an opportunity for China to monitor (the seawater) on its own," adding that it is "important and possible to seek common ground from a scientific perspective." This could be the opening that allows our proposal to move forward.

After all, China is becoming increasingly reliant on nuclear energy (with 55 operational reactors and another 21 under construction). Japan has already restarted operations at several of its nuclear plants following the shutdown of all facilities after March 11, 2011. If public confidence in the safety of nuclear energy is weakened by China's disinformation campaign, this could come back to haunt Beijing — and the world, given the role that nuclear energy must play in efforts to combat climate change.

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