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TAJUK ARTIKEL	NUCLEAR ENERGY MOMENTUM GROWING IN JAPAN		
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Nuclear energy momentum growing in Japan

FIFTEEN years after the Fukushima disaster displaced more than 160,000 residents, Japan is reviving its nuclear sector to meet a growing demand for clean, stable and lower-cost electricity. The plan to restart the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant's No 6 unit in the Niigata prefecture – which at full capacity is one of the world's largest nuclear complexes – was seen as a milestone in the country's push to bring more of its 33 operable reactors back online.

The Japanese government approved a revised Strategic Energy Plan at a cabinet meeting in February 2025. The revised plan stated that nuclear power would be utilised to the "maximum" extent possible, and removed wording from the previous plan that called for the nation to "reduce dependence" on this power source. The government has set a target of having nuclear power account for 20% of Japan's energy mix by fiscal 2040, up from the current level of less than 10%. The restart of nuclear power is also hoped to lead to lower energy bills for the people in the future.

Achieving this energy mix goal will require rebooting the majority of the nation's 33 nuclear reactors.

Before the 2011 disaster, Japan maintained one of the world's most extensive nuclear programmes. In the years since, only 15 reactors have resumed operation, largely because of a rigorous approval process from local and prefectural governments.

Last November, Niigata Governor Hideyo Hanazumi officially approved the restart of the No 6 reactor, and Hokkaido Governor Naomichi Suzuki in December gave the green light to restarting the No 3 reactor at Hokkaido Electric Power Co's Tomari nuclear power plant. Hokkaido Electric plans to cut electricity bills for households by 11% if the Tomari reactor resumes operating.

Energy hub

According to the *New York Times*, Niigata has long served as an energy hub. Kashiwazaki is known as the birthplace of Japan's modern oil industry, with the discovery of significant deposits here in the 1880s. The city's municipal office sits on the former headquarters of Japan's first oil major, Nippon Oil. By the 1960s, the region pivoted toward nuclear power.

Through its years of operation, the local nuclear plant has both sustained the local economy – employing thousands and generating tax and grant revenue – and provided Japan with a stable, clean source of power, Sakurai said.

"We take pride in the fact that Kashiwazaki has supported the Japanese economy through energy – first oil, now nuclear," he said.

The decision to green-light the restart came after a vote in December by Niigata's prefectoral assembly to approve a petition supporting the move, which Governor Hideyo Hanazumi endorsed. Hanazumi



Before 2011, nuclear supplied about 30% of Japan's power. Today, slow growth in renewables has left the country reliant on imported gas and coal for much of its energy needs. — Photos: Noriko Hayashi/The New York Times



For some local residents like Nakayama, the restart of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant underscores a lopsided exchange where electricity is channeled to urban centres from rural communities that shoulder the risk of hosting nuclear facilities.

"Climate change is undeniably advancing," Sakurai said, adding that salmon, a major industry in Niigata, are not returning to local rivers because of rising sea temperatures.

"To prevent its advance, we need stable, carbon-free electricity," he said. "Therefore, for the time being, I believe nuclear is necessary in Kashiwazaki."

Worldwide trend

The Japanese government's urgency to restart nuclear reactors is motivated in part by the direct connection this issue has with Japan's industrial competitiveness, *The Yomiuri Shimbun* reported.

Expanding usage of nuclear power is a global trend. In 2024, US tech giant Microsoft signed a contract to purchase electricity from the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in the northeastern United States for 20 years. Google and Amazon have also announced plans to make massive investments in next-generation reactors.

The administration of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has pledged to pour money into fields such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors as part of an economic growth strategy. All these fields consume vast amounts of electricity, so the nation's demand for power will certainly increase.

Consequently, there are mounting concerns within the government about what could happen if the nation does not fully harness nuclear power.

"We'll be left behind in global competition," a senior Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry official told *The Yomiuri Shimbun*.

Waseda University Prof. Noriko Endo, an expert on nuclear power, said, "Creating a stable supply of electricity will impact every industry, ranging from automobiles to defence. It'll affect our nation's strength." — ©2026 The New York Times Company/Asia News Network



Sakurai says his city, which hosts the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant, takes pride in supplying the rest of Japan with clean energy derived from nuclear power.

had pledged to "seek the public's mandate" before granting consent – a phrase some residents interpreted as a promise for a direct referendum. Instead, the governor cited the assembly's vote as representative of the public will.

"It is an insult to democracy," said Hitoshi Nakayama, a Niigata City Council member. That is the "unfortunate reality" of the endemic "warped structure" of nuclear power, Nakayama said.

"Local will is influenced by grants and subsidies, while risk is pushed onto a local region for the sake of massive energy consumption in a major city."

Kashiwazaki Mayor Masahiro Sakurai sees the plan to restart

the plant differently. Beyond the economic benefits, he framed the decision as a necessity to combat climate change – a crisis that he said affected locals as much as the rest of Japan.

Sakurai said his eyes had been opened to how quickly global warming was progressing on a recent trip to the Himalayas, where he saw snowmelt overflowing hydropower dams. In Kashiwazaki, he has pushed an initiative to decarbonise the city through a mix of solar megaprojects and battery storage.

Sitting in his office, he pointed to Mount Yoneyama, a bell-shaped peak that towers over Kashiwazaki. In January, it was only partly dusted in snow.