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Japan's Green Energy Push

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Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 12 Number 30 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

Matthew Penney

With the passing of the first anniversary of the Fukushima Daiichi failure and meltdowns, various Japanese NGOs, activists, and energy specialists are stepping up efforts to convince the Japanese government to roll out a comprehensive support plan for solar power and other green energy sources.

On March 20, TV Asahi broadcast an appeal to government by Softbank chief Son Masayoshi, one of the key figures in the solar push (see here for *The Asia-Pacific Journal*'s July 2011 coverage of Son's activism). He is asking the Japanese government to implement a plan to buy solar produced energy at set rates in order to encourage both production and adoption of solar panels. Son and the group *Shitei Toshi Shizen Energy Kyogikai*, formed last year in the wake of the 3.11 disasters, propose a variety of unique measures including paying higher rates for energy produced in urban areas where space for laying solar panels is at a premium. According to TV Tokyo, there are plans to set up programs by which businesses and cooperatives can rent rooftop space from homeowners and others to increase panel space.

The group has major supporters including the mayors of Kyoto, Sapporo and Fukuoka who serve as board members. Through groups such as this, Son is building a coalition of powerful local politicians to rally for a comprehensive national solar program. Kyoto mayor Kadokawa Daisaku, for example, pledged to "build a society not reliant on nuclear power" in his recent Manifesto for the city's future, promising to turn Kyoto into a "smart community". He is also pledging city funding for residents who wish to switch to solar in the short term. On top of that, solar power is linked directly with "disaster awareness". Dispersed solar generation, it is held, is more secure in the case of a natural disaster than nuclear. With "Eco"(logical) becoming a keyword for local boosterism, an alternative is emerging to the central government's hesitance to outline clear alternatives to the country's currently mothballed nuclear reactors and plans to boost to the national economy through nuclear exports.

Tokyo governor Ishihara is a strong supporter of nuclear power (last year he was quoted in Bloomberg as supporting more nuclear power as well as nuclear weapons for Japan: "Japan should absolutely possess nuclear weapons," Ishihara said in a July 15 interview at his office in Tokyo, citing China and North Korea as

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potential threats. "I don't think we can easily do away with atomic power. Nuclear energy is inexpensive if managed well," he also said.) *Nikkei* reports, however, that the metropolis is currently in the midst of an "abandon TEPCO" boom in home solar energy installation. In this way, the company's monopoly and often appalling behavior may end up boosting solar acceptance in the capital region, or at least help to entrench anti-nuclear pro-alternative buzz words in Japan's media discourse and further sideline individuals like Ishihara who are going against public opinion.

Urban strength is one thing, but Son is also successfully rallying support in peripheral areas that do not have nuclear plants. There are elements of inter-region competition here, but that force could strengthen support for green energy in diverse constituencies. Son has enlisted the support of governors of prefectures including Okayama, Kanagawa, Tokushima, Akita, Nagano, Osaka, and Saga. While none of these leaders are running for office under a "green party" banner, it appears as though Son is using solar and green energy planning to build a nationwide political infrastructure that will be able to exert at least some influence at the center.

Concretely, according to SankeiBiz, Son is requesting that 40 yen be paid per kilowatt hour for solar-produced electricity. This is over four times current nuclear rates, but comparable with oil. The cost of solar includes massive upfront investments. However, a *NikkeiBP* article outlines how companies are exploring strategies to reduce construction costs, which may make solar more competitive over the next decade.

As the Japanese media buzzes about solar, Son seems omnipresent. On March 19, he appeared with Minami Souma mayor Sakurai Katsunobu, famous for his Youtube appeal for support that garnered hundreds of thousands of hits when it was posted barely two weeks after his town was devastated by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis. Son and Sakurai are pushing to have the region designated the site of a "mega solar" project, effectively turning the disaster zone into a huge experimental green energy project. Son is pushing for faster decontamination and at the same time, clear plans to rebuild the area's economic foundation through alternative energy and green energy construction jobs.

Solar power seems to be attaining greater and greater credibility as an energy alternative in Japan's mass media. On March 20, the *Nikkei* reported that by the end of the year, solar production is set to hit six million kilowatts, or the equivalent of six nuclear power plants. This is a strong first step, and widespread pressure on the Noda government to entrench gains with a detailed (and generous) green energy plan is showing important changes in both business, civil society, and media representations of energy alternatives since March 2011.

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