

NST Leader: Japan's nuclear wastewater

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This aerial picture taken by Jiji Press on February 14, 2021 shows a view of storage tanks used for storing treated water at TEPCO's crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant at Okuma, Fukushima prefecture. The Japanese government will decide on August 22, 2023 about the release of treated water from the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea, the government minister in charge said. (Photo by JIJI Press / AFP)

FUKUSHIMA is a dreaded word in the region because what happens there doesn't stay there. There in Japan on March 11, 2011, an earthquake and tsunami, in that order, knocked out the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear-power plant, releasing untreated radioactive water into the sea.

Given the state of the nuclear plant technology then — or even now — there wasn't the time for the radioactive elements to self-destruct. The human mind, including the Japanese ones, for some reason didn't perceive that calamities can happen all at once.

The Fukushima disaster is such a tale of instantaneous conjunction of calamities. On a visit to the disaster zone on Sunday, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was

quoted by news agency AFP as saying that he was refraining from "commenting on a concrete timing of the release into the ocean at this point in time", leaving ample room for a prime ministerial hint that it will be soon.

Some 500 Olympic-size swimming pools of wastewater, accumulated over 12 years after the disaster, are expected to be released into the Pacific Ocean. The fact that it would be a slow release over 10 years registered no effect in the region's dread meter.

The region is on dread-watch, but much of it is coated with diplomatic niceties. China has been the most vociferous in opposing the release of the wastewater into the ocean. In China, dread comes mixed with geopolitical anger, given that Tokyo is a tango partner of Washington.

If a taste of Chinese animus is needed, here is one quote from a Beijing official, gleefully circulated by the Western media: Japan is treating the sea as its sewer. An interesting take, we must say, now that all nations without exception are treating the seas as their sewer.

How many marine lives were destroyed or how many people have ingested radioactive materials through seafood after the accident 12 years ago is hard to tell. Nuclear literature tells us if the water isn't treated properly, dangerous isotopes can have devastating effects, including DNA-damaging ones. Should we fear? Yes and no. Start with yes.

The Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), the operator of the crippled nuclear plant, and Japanese regulators stand accused of negligence, notwithstanding the earthquake and tsunami. Now that Tepco and the government are saying the 1.34 million tonnes of wastewater planned to be released into the Pacific Ocean is safe, many in Japan don't believe them. Both are victims of trust deficit.

Kishida, though he wasn't prime minister when disaster struck in 2011, is in need of reputation management advice. Not just to repair the trust deficit at home, but also abroad.

China has banned seafood from Fukushima and considering a wider ban. Others in the region are beginning to be infected by China's isotope fear, not because of Beijing's geopolitics, but because of the nightmarish outcome of radioactive contamination. If the dread grows, it will cripple more than Fukushima.

Now for the no, our second response to Japan's release of the treated wastewater into the ocean. The world shouldn't fear because the Japanese guarantee that the dangerous radioactive elements have been filtered out and comes stamped with the approval of the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency

. Unless, of course, if the world has reasons to believe that the IAEA, too, comes branded with a trust deficit.