

— **Opinion**

Pacific region need not fear nuclear site's water discharge into sea

Japan's ambassador to Australia marks the 12th anniversary of the Fukushima nuclear disaster with a pledge to safely dispose of water stored at the site.

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Japanese Ambassador



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For millennia, mankind has coexisted with both nature's abundant blessings and its sheer ferocity. Nowhere has this ferocity been felt more strongly than in Turkey and Syria following last month's devastating earthquake. My heart goes out to all those affected as the destruction continues to take its toll on families and communities.

Soon after the earthquake struck, Japan sent disaster relief teams, supported by the Japanese Self-Defence Force's aircraft. In fact, Japan is no stranger to the ferocity of nature. On countless occasions, the global community has reached out to help Japan, as it did 12 years ago.



Tanks used to store treated radioactive water used to cool down melted fuel at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. **AP**

On March 11, 2011, our North-Eastern (Tohoku) region was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami, which resulted in the loss of more than 20,000 lives. Despite the indelible pain that resonates with this date, March 11 has also become a symbol of international solidarity.

Our [Aussie mates](https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/are-australia-s-neighbours-ready-for-aukus-20230301-p5colo) [https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/are-australia-s-neighbours-ready-for-aukus-20230301-p5colo] were some of the first to respond. Less than three days after the disaster, assistance came from the Australian Defence Force, Emergency Management Australia, as well as police forces, firefighters, ambulance services, and search and rescue dog handlers from across Australia.

A 76-member Urban Search and Rescue team was sent along with Australian diplomats to search for tsunami survivors. RAAF C-17 aircraft transported food, supplies and personnel around Japan. A month later, the first foreign leader to visit Tohoku was then prime minister of Australia Julia Gillard. The smiles her gifts of toy koalas and kangaroos brought to the faces of exhausted children have become symbolic of the warmth of our countries' friendship.

Japan also received support from friends in the Pacific region. Generous donations, relief and encouragement reached Tohoku from governments, local communities, schools and individuals from across the region. In 2015, Pacific Islands leaders gathered in the disaster-affected area of Fukushima to attend the 7th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM7), in a show of solidarity. They came back to Fukushima again in 2018 for PALM8.

Tohoku's reconstruction effort continues more than a decade later. Many Australian and Pacific businesses and individuals have offered their continued support. Almost all PIF members, including Australia, have lifted restrictions on food imports from Tohoku.

Return of international visitors

The return of international visitors to Tohoku is also crucial for local communities. In April 2021, on the 10th anniversary of the disaster, I held a reception to honour the victims and to express our deep gratitude for the support we continue to receive.

One of the most significant challenges in the continuing reconstruction process is the decommissioning of the tsunami-affected Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station. The planned discharge of the water stored at the site into the sea off Japan's east coast is an integral part.

As the only country in the world to have experienced the devastation of atomic bombings, and as a member of the Pacific community, Japan could never allow the lives of citizens in Japan and Pacific Island countries, nor the marine environment around Japan and in the Pacific to be endangered by the discharge. Japan is therefore determined *not* to discharge a single drop of water unless verifiably safe.

The process and facilities that will be engaged have been meticulously designed to ensure that the water will be sufficiently purified and diluted before being discharged, so that the level of radioactivity will be far below regulatory standards. For example, the level of tritium, often discussed in this context, will be seven times lower than the standard for drinking water set by the World Health Organisation.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), acknowledged by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders as "the international authority on nuclear safety" at their recent meeting, has been reviewing Japan's discharge plan and will continue to do so to ensure safety and transparency based on scientific data.

Confidence in the IAEA's independent review and the safety of the planned discharge has also been expressed by Australian scientists, including in [an article](https://theconversation.com/no-the-fukushima-water-release-is-not-going-to-kill-the-pacific-ocean-200902) [https://theconversation.com/no-the-fukushima-water-release-is-not-going-to-kill-the-pacific-ocean-200902] by Associate Professor Nigel Marks, Professor Brendan Kennedy and Honorary Associate Professor Tony Irwin for *The Conversation*.

Japan will intensify its political and expert-level dialogue

[<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/china-australia-defence-talks-could-restart-soon-marles-20221209-p5c50f>] with our Pacific neighbours, as endorsed by PIF leaders at the meeting. It is not only the safety but also the understanding of the people of the Pacific region that are of paramount importance to Japan.

As residents of the Pacific region, we continue to face many challenges

[<https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/why-aukus-should-really-become-jaukus-20221116-p5byqn>], from earthquakes and tsunamis to rising sea levels and other impacts of climate change. Japan is determined to deal with these challenges in close partnership with our Pacific neighbours.

Next year's PALMI0 will be an important milestone in our pursuit of common endeavours. Reflecting on the warm support that we have received from Australia and our Pacific neighbours on this 12th anniversary of the 2011 tragedy gives us hope. Anything is possible with your mates by your side.

Shingo Yamagami is Japan's ambassador to Australia.



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