

In the wake of cataclysmic energy disasters occurring on opposite sides of the globe, some interesting regional and national reflections are currently underway that may-or may not-alter long-term energy futures in the U.S. and abroad.

One development this week that drew surprisingly little public attention is that no less a personage than the Prime Minister of Japan advocated that his country reduce and eventually eliminate its dependence on nuclear power. He made this assessment in the wake of the multiple reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, following the March 11th tsunami that ravaged Japan's northeastern coastline. Prime Minister Naoto Kan stated, "Japan should aim for a society that does not depend on nuclear energy."

I find this policy shift by Japan's highest government official remarkable, since no nation on the planet (with the possible exception of France and Israel) has in the modern era so heavily relied on nuclear power for its energy needs. It will be interesting to see if Japan's present disillusionment with nuclear power in fact translates into a long-term transition to other sources of electricity or if, with the passage of time, the Fukushima disaster fades from public consciousness and Japan continues its present, overwhelming dependence on nuclear power.

Meanwhile, today marks the one-year anniversary of the successful capping of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. That achievement, of course, followed four months of Keystone Kops-type, unsuccessful efforts by both British Petroleum and federal officials to staunch the flow of crude oil into the marine and terrestrial environments of the Gulf Coast.

A year later, the region's tourism economy is returning to normal (after a predictably devastating 2010), and offshore petroleum exploration and extraction activity continues apace. Only the Gulf Coast fishing industry continues to feel the continuing economic effects of last year's spill. And, of course, it remains far too early to assess with any reliability the degree of long-term damage the spill has caused the battered Gulf Coast environment.

One can surmise that if the Deepwater Horizon disaster had occurred off this country's Atlantic or Pacific coasts, it would have triggered the type of transformative political debate over national energy policy that we're currently witnessing in post-tsunami Japan. But my hunch is that oil and offshore drilling are so deeply ingrained in the Gulf Coast's economy, culture and politics that we will see a return to energy business-as-usual along the Gulf. And, perhaps, with respect to U.S. energy policy generally?