The government on Sept. 14 announced a new long-term energy policy that stated the government "will mobilize all available policy resources to reach 'zero operation' of nuclear power plants in the 2030s" to "realize as soon as possible a society that does not rely on nuclear power." The announcement shows that the people can, by publicly expressing their desires and coming together as one voice, pressure the government into ending reliance on nuclear power generation. Still, the people need to remain vigilant as the government’s policy is ambiguous and contains contradictions.

The new policy is not a clear commitment to end Japan's reliance on nuclear power in the 2030s. In fact, even under the policy, Japan will still rely on nuclear power for about 15 percent of its total electricity in 2030, a goal which the government earlier tried to make people accept.

Of Japan's 50 nuclear power reactors, only the Nos. 3 and 4 reactors at Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Oi nuclear power plant are currently online. If the government, the power industry, other industrial sectors and the household sector make a serious effort, including further cutting their electrical use, Japan should be able to end its reliance on nuclear power at an earlier date. Many people are willing to pay higher electricity bills entailed by reduction and ending of nuclear power generation.

Businesses should look at the withdrawal from nuclear power generation as an opportunity for investment and innovation. Investment is needed for development of new technologies to promote renewable energy, improvements in power transmission lines to link green energy sources to end users, development of a smart grid and construction of alternating current cycle conversion facilities for two-way transmission of electricity produced in western Japan (60 cycles per second) and eastern Japan (50 cycles).

Under the new policy, a 40-year operation limit will be imposed on each reactor. But the
relevant law allows a 20-year extension if certain conditions are met. It is not certain what specific policy the Nuclear Regulatory Commission will take. Keeping a strict watch over the government and the NRC is called for. Trade and industry minister Yukio Edano said that the three nuclear power plants now under construction will not be abandoned. This means that they will remain online at least into the 2050s.

The biggest contradiction in the policy is continuation of the nuclear fuel cycle to extract plutonium and uranium from spent nuclear fuel to make new nuclear fuel. Current agreements with Aomori Prefecture, which houses nuclear fuel cycle-related facilities, say that if the nuclear fuel cycle policy is abandoned, nearly 3,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel stored there must be returned to nuclear power plants. The agreements have forced the government to continue the policy. Technologies for the nuclear fuel cycle and for the permanent storing of high-level nuclear waste have not been established. There are moral reasons as well, such as the mess we will leave for future generations. The logical conclusion is that Japan should end the nuclear fuel cycle. Spent nuclear fuel storage at most nuclear power plants is already filling up and will reach capacity in the not-so-distant future, so there is even stronger reason to end nuclear power generation at an earlier date.