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An Argumentative Approach to Representations of Fukushima *A Case Study of the Legacy Media Coverage over the Russian Invasion in Ukraine*

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines how the Fukushima nuclear accident provided the basis for authorizing the inference in reasoning of the German and Japanese climate policies in the *New York Times* coverage over conflicts between Russia and Ukraine. It also focuses on the ways in which not the a-bombed cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the nuclear disaster, Fukushima, was used for demonstrating what was actually happening at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station in the metaphorical framework.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, history, news media, newspapers, policy argumentation, political context, reasoning, validity

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with wind and solar energy, France, Europe's largest nuclear energy producer, in an unusual alliance with Eastern European countries, took part in looking to expand nuclear energy programs. Including Britain, those European countries desperate for a long-term and reliable source of energy to help reach ambitious climate goals turned to an answer to complement renewable energy—nuclear power. In the climate movement, the nuclear industry thus tried to have a good chance for a revival. Since a meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan in 2011, the industry indeed sought a plausible opportunity to win recognition of nuclear energy as an acceptable source of clean power just like solar and wind. For the push to net-zero emissions and energy independence in an energy crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, President Emmanuel Macron released an overview of building a new generation of nuclear reactors (Alderman, 2022, p. B4). In such political moves to redefine nuclear energy as a sustainable investment, Germany did not buy the idea that nuclear would be a solution to climate change. In reality, European countries began worrying that they might fall far short of energy supply even as they would step up investments in wind and solar power. The argument was that wind and solar power alone would not be enough to help countries meet the goals outlined at the United Nations (UN) climate summit at Glasgow in November 2021. Nonetheless, the German government took a tough stance on defusing efforts to include more nuclear power in Europe's green energy mix, following a 2011 policy set by then Chancellor Angela Merkel. In spite of the energy crunch, Germany sought a possible way to carry out the policy to shut down its last three nuclear power plants within the year of 2022.

This reminded the world after the disasters at Fukushima and Chernobyl not merely that new nuclear stations would take up a decade or more to come online, but that safety questions could not be ignored, along with concerns over a proliferation of nuclear plants and of radioactive waste that they produce.

This paper explores the ways in which the Fukushima nuclear accident was used for authorizing the inference in reasoning of the German and Japanese climate policies specifically in the legacy media coverage over conflicts between Russia and Ukraine from 24 February to 24 August 2022. By doing so, the study discusses whether the *New York Times* effectively or ineffectively set the political agenda—economic warfare with Russia as the outcome of the Ukraine war—in order to strengthen public support for the U.S. foreign policy to cripple the world's 11th-biggest economy, one of the biggest exporters of energy, grain, and other commodities. For that purpose, what follows first introduces the concept of validity in ordinary argumentation, then explains the perils of global warming, and finally examines the ways in which relations between climate neutrality and energy security complicate matters in German and Japanese policy arguments covered by the U.S. qualified newspaper.

2. VALIDITY IN ORDINARY ARGUMENTATION

In ordinary argumentation, the relationship between the evidence and the claim is concerned. Along with the truth and quality of the evidence, this is the major consideration affecting the strength of an everyday argument. Here does the question come up of what enables the evidence to take as evidence for the particular claim.

The answer to that question is linked to the concept of validity which designates a test for the quality of an argument that is independent of the content of the evidence or claim. It does not ask whether the evidence is true, but rather if the evidence is true, whether the claim would be true. While the strength of the evidence is expected to strengthen the claim, the warrant will be a more general statement that makes underlying reasoning valid, or seemingly valid. Invalid reasoning can be considered to take a form of faulty reasoning, but not of failure to reach resolution of a difference of opinion as arguments in everyday language are so often incomplete (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkemans, 2010, pp. 132-134).

What counts as valid will vary with patterns of inference. What is more, the warrant will not be self-evident in ordinary argumentation. That judgment is known to be fallible, and yet to make it is reasonable if over time similar judgments have been brought about by subsequent experience to be reasonable (Zarefsky, 2019, pp. 104-107 & 137-154).

3. THE PERILS OF GLOBAL WARMING

Prior to the covid-19 pandemic, globalization brought about increasing energy needs. While the strong demand for large-scale energy production resulted in a growing rise of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from traditional fossil fuels, the spectre of climate change began calling for the urgent need to cut down greenhouse gases. In the name of “nuclear renaissance,” in the beginning of this century, nuclear power thus became viewed as one

clean, reliable energy that could be embraced by developing and developed countries alike. However, high-profile nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima have demonstrated the underlying vulnerability of nuclear technology to human errors, design flaws, and natural disasters. In other words, enormous health, environmental, and economic costs became factored into a national energy policy—either including or excluding nuclear power as an option.

It was a triple disaster—a magnitude 9.0 earthquake followed by a 14-meter tsunami and the subsequent full meltdown, possibly even melt-through, of three of the six nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station owned by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) in northeastern Japan—that at once a Japanese local name, Fukushima, began standing for the multifaceted complexity of the events that took place on 11 March 2011 and all that became unfolded in the months ever since. Fukushima rhymes with the a-bomb city, Hiroshima. In addition, referring to this singular event as “3.11,” obviously evokes the political valence of “9.11” in the United States, thereby forging a parallel between the two crises and societies (Anderson, 2011). Nevertheless, the referents of 3.11 and Fukushima rarely coincided in the *New York Times* coverage of the sanctions war with Russia.

In the resurgence of energy security due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, pushing for a nuclear revival to slash planet-warming emissions appeared as a pivotal moment in a growing debate over climate change. The divide took on new dimensions as means global leaders pledge to avert a climate catastrophe and to grapple with an energy shortage.

4. PRAGMATIC CAUSAL ARGUMENT

One of the frequently used, but complex schemes is argument from cause in everyday argumentation, which would explain how it is possible that an alleged factor could be the cause and why it is more likely than are other possible causes. Taking into deep consideration the threat posed by global warming that afflicted the whole world, Germany focused specifically on an unforeseen contingency of nuclear disaster in a profound influence of contextual cues on making decisions, formulating judgments, or expressing opinions. Even though it would be unlikely that nuclear power could play anything close to a dominant role in its energy supplies, Japan, facing a deep energy crunch, sought to rely on it for reaching net-zero energy.

4.1 Energy transition in Germany

Immediately after the Fukushima nuclear disaster broke out, the Merkel administration announced that Germany would be phasing out its 17 nuclear reactors, which provided one-fourth of the country's electricity together with identifying alternative sources of energy (Friedman, 2022, p. A22). An energy transition from coal and nuclear energy to renewables took for granted an adequate supply of Nord Stream 2. Even though Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, the German government discouraged questioning the viability of this gas pipeline. Despite the outbreak of Russian-Ukrainian war on 24 February 2022, the governing coalition still ruled out the idea of using nuclear power in order to ease an energy

crisis by restating that postponing the shutdown was “not a good plan” (Alderman & Reed, 2022, p. B1).

In the *New York Times* coverage for half a year, Germany seemed to prioritize the global issue of climate change to geopolitical uncertainty and national energy crisis in its decision-making. Yet the German government needed to reconsider most immediately in rising calls for a boycott on Russian energy by G7 the vision that —cheap and plentiful, cleaner than coal and safer than nuclear—liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia was once seen as a crucial transitional fuel as the country gradually shifted from coal and oil to renewable energy. What is more, LNG turned out to be no longer cheap or plentiful, sending prices soaring on the continent. In Germany, such a chaos in energy markets led to greater needs not for the revival or deferral of nuclear energy, but for the development of sustainable resources.

Political moves towards curbing energy imports from Russia meant the turn to advancing renewable energy and/or preserving nuclear power. On the one hand, some European countries like France planned to promote energy security by constructing new nuclear reactors, which was shunned by many European nations after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. On the other hand, Germany went for solar power in particular, instead the latter. Its steps were likely to take time and could be politically contentious about soaring energy prices, i.e., the disruption to Russian gas supplies, leaving German people wonder how their government was planning to make its energy policy workable and future-proof. Yet the Fukushima nuclear disaster pushed Germany to take its nuclear plants offline. Not only would it further its efforts at energy independence and security, but would also reduce carbon emissions in line with Europe’s net-zero emission goal by 2050.

In the light of causal generalizations, the probably unstated statement of warrants is that Germany wishes to avoid nuclear meltdowns and radiation contaminations in addition to such climate impacts like extreme weather. Another unspoken premise is the country’s unresolved concerns over the storage of nuclear waste. From the means-end prediction and the statement of the desired end, the German government concludes that the country should develop solar and wind power (the means to be pursued toward the end) for climate and moral imperative (See Figure 1).

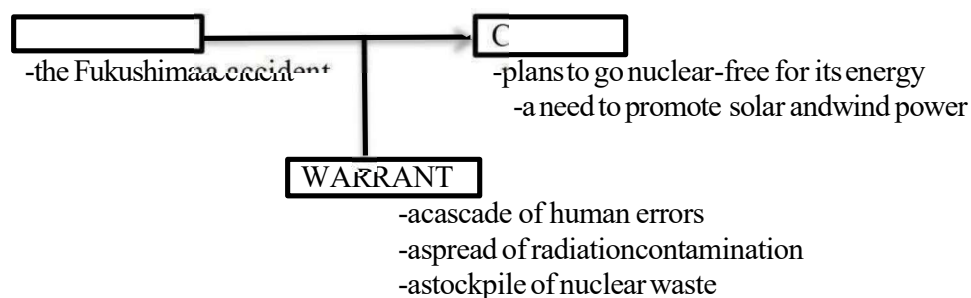


Figure 1: Logical validity in Germany’s policy argument

The cause-based warrants in Figure 1 suggest how and why Germany takes into serious consideration the geopolitical implications of dependency on Russian gas as well. In the carbon-free power example, it is not some inherent good of solar and wind power that recommends its adoption, but rather the consequence of averting a future nuclear disaster like Fukushima.

In patterns of causal argument, which can be used either to support or to discredit a claim, the strategy of relabeling is used exclusively as a way to cover something deficient in the ordinary argument. It is sometimes sufficient without explaining because the connotation of a technical term suggests that something is amiss. As causal responsibility focuses on the origin of climate change, on the one hand, why and how it occurs is relevant for understanding political issues and events. On the other hand, given the geopolitical implications and a sudden spike in energy and food prices, the obstacles for Japan to complement Russian supplies seemed to be logistical, financial as well as political.

4.2 Energy security in Japan

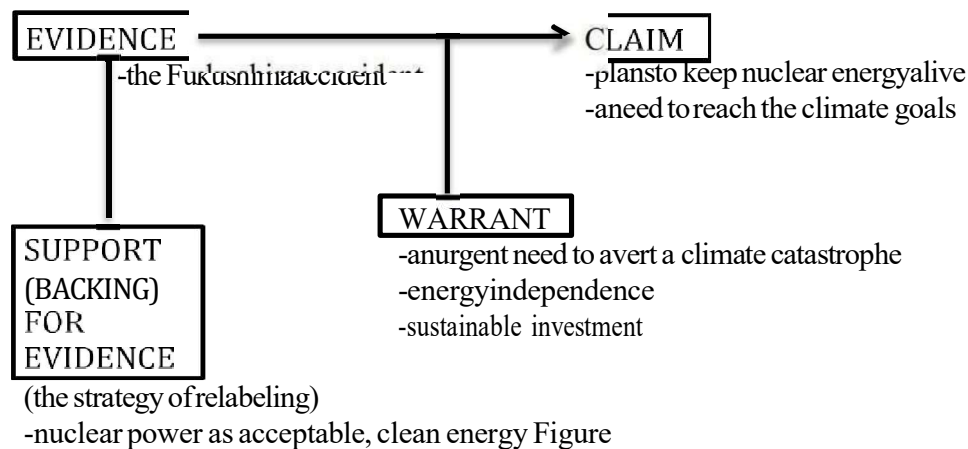
Prime Minister Kishida's plans for restarting and recovering nuclear power plants relabeled nuclear energy as a valuable option for national security, and yet a number of hurdles lied in the way to forge energy independence and to help bridge a Russian energy squeeze. Immediately after the meltdowns of three nuclear reactors at the Fukushima power station, Japan began embracing LNG as a transition energy in addition to reducing energy consumption as a whole country. Since then, around one-third of Japan's electricity had been made up for by burning LNG (Reed, 2022, p. A7). Hence the conflict between Russia and Ukraine left Japan in an awkward position of confronting the political as well as strategic vulnerabilities. Indeed, Moscow's aggression offered the Japanese "iron triangle" industrial complex, i.e., the administrative-bureaucratic-industrial vested interest, a great opportunity to recoup nuclear power in the overall energy mix for national energy portfolios. On the whole, the unexpected, geopolitical outcomes led Japan to dismiss a fresh idea to bring up a reliable and affordable power supply in a disaster-prone country out of hand.

The Ukraine crisis, more or less, reversed the Japanese nuclear industry's gradual decline resulting from the 2011 Fukushima disaster by highlighting an urgent need for Japan to secure alternative energy supplies. As a resource-poor country, Japan sought to confront geostrategic blunders to accelerate transition to renewable energy, especially the difficulty of meeting clean energy goals and of fulfilling the country's electricity demands. As a compelling reason to go green, however, ruling politicians began calling for a fresh look at nuclear power. This would involve committing to years of investments in the necessary equipment, knowhow, and human resources for nuclear technology. The current administration began taking a defensive position on climate change, by underscoring that nuclear energy does not produce direct carbon emissions. Moreover, resistance by the largest power companies had kept solar and wind power from being well integrated into the electrical grid by restating that renewables are less dependable and hard to store (Samuels, 2013, pp. 118-123 & 148-153). In the conflicts of interest, a need for seeking a quick fix led the government to argue not only for investment in more supplies of LNG, but also for a return to nuclear energy in the name of a balanced mix of energy sources.

Although the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) announced that nuclear power plants should generate more than 20 percent of Japan's electricity by 2030, at the moment, nuclear energy contributed less than 4 percent of the nation's electricity, down from nearly a third before the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Rich & Hida, 2022, p. A4). Local opposition was not the only obstacle to restarting nuclear power stations. All plants needed to follow the strict new guidelines adopted by Japan's nuclear regulator two years

after the Fukushima nuclear accident. Indeed, the war in Ukraine and the threat to a blackout in Tokyo after a strong earthquake on 16 March 2022 made the country more receptive to support a restart of nuclear power plants. While more than 60 percent of the Japanese public opposed rebooting the nuclear power plants in 2018, in a March 2022 poll by the Nikkei business newspaper, 53 percent supported to restart the plants (Rich & Hida, 2022, p. A4). Without reflecting upon the contentious issue of nuclear waste, the nuclear industry began making opportunistic declarations.

By claiming that nuclear power will be aligned perfectly with zero-emission goals, the Japanese government includes it in the current energy mix policy towards reaching carbon neutrality. In order to keep its word, as Figure 2 shows, the government makes the best of the pervasive practice of relabeling nuclear energy projects as environmentally friendly.



2: Pragmatic validity in Japan's policy argument

The strategy of relabeling nuclear power as eco-friendly is in itself greenwashing. The effect is that Japanese people view nuclear energy in a different light, and therefore their attitudes change. Such frame-shifting plays down the risks of nuclear accidents in the cost-benefit perspective. Indeed, the rising prices of oil and gas made nuclear energy more seemingly competitive. Nevertheless, the spectre of nuclear disasters left many Japanese, especially, those who still live with the devastating 2011 Fukushima nuclear catastrophe, traumatized.

A given geopolitical shift raised concerns over energy security. Only three months after the Glasgow climate summit, the global consensus on the critically important transition to renewable energy turned out to take a backseat to energy security since Russia started a major confrontation with the West over Ukraine. In the *New York Times* coverage over Japan's energy policy for those six months, the renewed focus on energy independence and national security worked out well as a valid excuse to policymakers for backsliding on efforts to make the Fukushima nuclear disaster recontextualized as moral questions. Skyrocketing oil and gas bills forced the country to deal explicitly with an energy shortfall. Japan could not make a decision on whether they should be in support of or against a nuclear-dependent society. Whereas Germany came to acknowledge the downsides of dependency on Russian energy, Japan failed to turn the tables on its long-standing pro-nuclear policy by facing up to gnawing anxiety for an invisible threat of

radiation exposure. These political and strategic vulnerabilities show how challenging the transition to green energy to be.

The sanctions war with Russia at first seemed to offer an answer by allowing the West to exert power through its control of the financial and technological networks at the heart of the 21st-century economy. Isolation from Western markets was supposed to end up with causing chaos in Russia, but at that moment over 100 countries with 40 percent of world GDP avoided taking part either in full or in partial embargoes (“Leaders,” 2022, p. 7). As most countries had no desire to follow such a West-led course of action, to an extent of mutual dependency, a globalized economy might be good at adapting to shocks and opportunities. Enforcing a global embargo was hard for both Germany and Japan to avoid blackouts at home and to reduce Russia’s oil-and-gas revenues abroad. Moreover, the West feared for post-covid recession as well as inflation triggered by energy shortfalls. As a result of the side-effects of war, sky-high energy and food prices were to be a challenge to keep the West united.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

Definitions, which are stipulated to assure that parties are talking about the same thing, are adopted “for the sake of argument” (Zarefsky, 2019, p. 210). As Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argues, *all* definitions are *conventional* in the sense that the “factual” status of definitions is maintained only “so long as they remain unchallenged” (p. 211). In particular, political speakers construct a social reality by choosing contingency among multiple possibilities. Naming such a situation provides common grounds to take part in shaping and giving meaning to it. Since a situation by itself does not speak out, how to identify the context of what the public view is and how it manifests itself brings about a huge difference to the argument.

In the *New York Times* coverage over the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the first half of 2022, on the one hand, Berlin emphasized negative connotations of nuclear energy associated with the Fukushima nuclear disaster, thereby validating its claim to promote renewable as well as sustainable energy. On the other hand, Tokyo described nuclear power as acceptable, clean energy in transition to renewables. In order to meet the UN’s climate goals, Japan sought to revive a positive re-evaluation of nuclear power by taking an optimistic stance on nuclear-generated electric power. Both Japanese and German governments made a conciliatory gesture of taking into account the risks of climate catastrophe. However, they framed nuclear energy differently. To a much wider audience, Germany redefined the current situation of nuclear power plants not as a mere, technical issue, but as a moral question of public interest.

Just as using language to advance one interpretation or another, the way in which a situation is defined shapes the attitudes and actions of Japanese people towards nuclear energy. While Germany associated nuclear energy with clearly negative connotations by reminding the country as well as the world of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japan framed it as economically viable and scalable as well as green energy in highlighting a recent spike in energy prices. Here the denotation of nuclear power is held constant, but its connotative meaning is changed. This also uncovers the *New York Times*’ ambivalent attitudes toward nuclear power. What is more, the power of dissociation allows us to associate *atomic*

(bomb) with an *evil* power of mass destruction and *nuclear* (energy) with a *good* power of mass production. Indeed, in talk of a “nuclear renaissance” in the beginning of this century, nuclear power, if its technology is well regulated, was considered to have an important part to play in cutting greenhouse gases. Yet a series of nuclear explosions and meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi power station triggered at 2:46 PM on 11 March 2011 warned the whole world of a need to reflect upon the safety and security of nuclear energy.

Risking a catastrophe at the European largest nuclear power plant, Russia used territory around it as a staging ground for attacks on Ukraine positions. It was for the first time that the risks of nuclear plants on the battlefield became apparent and alarmed. Here the *New York Times* made the best of literal analogy between fighting around the nuclear power plants in Ukraine, especially targeting the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station, and the Fukushima nuclear accident. While describing stark aggression as natural disaster, the metaphorical framework cast doubt on nuclear safety. Moscow took advantage of gaining control over the nuclear power complex, which might be used as a form of nuclear blackmail and heighten tension between the adversaries. An errant shell or missile might set off an environmental disaster and, if a fire broke out, release clouds of radioactive particles that could get carried by the wind around Europe. Russia’s seizure of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear complex indeed raised a contingency of radiation contamination and leak in the fertile soil. Nonetheless, in the news coverage, no images of sudden, enormous destruction, symbolized in the rising mushroom cloud of the atomic explosions and the towering mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were called to mind. In other words, postwar Japan might fail to associate a nuclear power station with a serious military target, and even to show no grave concern about a spiral of deteriorating nuclear security. Russia’s belligerence could set off a nuclear catastrophe in Europe, invoking memories of the nuclear explosions and meltdowns in 2011 at Fukushima, but playing down those of the atomic blasts in 1945 at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From a plane crashing into the facility to natural disasters, no operating nuclear power plant was even in the middle of active fighting, but the sprawling Zaporizhzhia nuclear facility. In spite of being the first active nuclear power plant in a combat zone, it was not designed to withstand such a range of risk. Thus, as Figure 3 shows, the UN called for an immediate stop to fighting that risks a nuclear disaster.

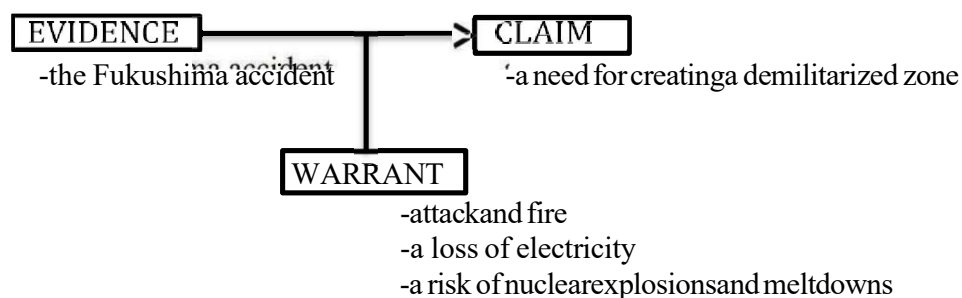


Figure 3: Validity in the metaphorical framework

The European Union and the United States also made a strong demand for establishing a demilitarized zone around the nuclear power plant. In the meantime, Russia and Ukraine blamed each other for strikes dangerously close to active reactors and stored nuclear waste. In those six months, there were no objective news reporting of damage to the reactor

buildings, but driving the world to fear for another nuclear tragedy. The most serious threat to the plant is a strike, either directly on a reactor or on a vital supporting gear, that causes a breakdown of its cooling system. On the whole, no one argued against that shelling around the nuclear plant site might result in one of the worst nuclear disasters in history.

Europe's geopolitical calculations were turned upside down by the war in Ukraine. European countries were, more or less, reliant on importing roughly 40 percent of its natural gas from Russia (Henderson, 2022). As Russia tightened LNG supplies, coal power plants were thus refired across Europe, and nuclear energy came to get a second look. Such a drastic shift brought about an energy shortage and high inflation that prevented Germany from taking the initiative in the transition path to climate neutrality. While moving forward with its "nuclear exit," on 5 September 2022, Germany announced the extension plan, i.e., a need to make two of its three remaining nuclear reactors alive as an emergency reserve for its electricity supply. On the whole, Germany seemed to make a balancing decision. In contrast, Japan took advantage of the current energy crisis to provide a convincing excuse for a high-risk nuclear technology. Here nuclear energy is relabeled as "safe" supply, as "reasonable" price, and as "efficient" energy so as to restart more existing nuclear plants and construct new ones. On each transition path toward a carbon-neutral future, in hindsight, the critical question would be raised about whether the Fukushima nuclear disaster would have indeed been a given turning point for the entire world.

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