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Nuclear push gathers steam

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An aerial view of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Okuma, Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. — Ko Sasaki/The New York Times

A file photo showing a massive sea wall in Fukushima Prefecture, part of a coastal defence system built to protect against tsunamis, like the one in 2011 that sparked a meltdown at a nuclear plant. — James Whitlow Delano/The New York Times

Nuclear push **gathers steam**

By RIVER AKIRA DAVIS and MEAGHAN TOBIN

IN 2011, a meltdown at a nuclear plant in Japan caused governments around the world to move decisively and swiftly away from atomic energy.

Fifteen years later, a different kind of energy crisis is hastening a move back.

The conflict in the Middle East is expected to cut the world off from millions of tonnes of liquefied natural gas, a fuel used extensively for power generation across Asia.

Even in Europe and other regions with sustained access to gas, the diminishing supply of energy is causing prices to surge.

In response, nuclear power, seen by countries as an alternative energy source that is less vulnerable to outside shocks, is finding new backing even in some of the most historically anti-nuclear places.

In Taiwan, where the ruling party has opposed nuclear energy for decades, President Lai Ching-te said the island should be open to nuclear power as a way to meet its growing energy demands.

The move was an abrupt departure from Taiwan's previous energy strategy.

After the 2011 disaster – when an earthquake and tsunami triggered a triple meltdown in Japan's Fukushima prefecture – Taiwan committed to a "nuclear-free homeland" policy.

The island shut down its final reactor in May 2025.

In the past month, Taiwan's energy supply has been strained by the conflict in the Middle East.

The phaseout of nuclear power has left the island precariously dependent on imports for nearly all its energy needs, just as its vital semiconductor industry requires more power.

Taiwan procures about a third of its LNG from Qatar, prompting officials to scramble for additional shipments from the United States.

Days after Lai's remarks, Taiwan's state utility company, Taipower, submitted a plan to restart one of the island's nuclear plants.

The president's decision "surprised many people, including members of his own party," said Titus Chen, deputy director of a research institute at National Chengchi University in Taipei.

Given decades of concern over building nuclear plants and storing fuel and waste on an island prone to earthquakes, he said the ruling party's opposition to nuclear power "had become almost untouchable".

> "Whenever an energy crisis occurs, the topic of nuclear power comes up from the perspective of energy security."
>
> Hajime Matsukubo

Similar shifts are visible across Asia, which buys about 90% of the liquefied natural gas that the Middle East produces.

In Japan, which mothballed its entire nuclear fleet after the 2011 disaster, regulators decided recently to alter anti-terrorism requirements to effectively prevent the shutdown of some operational reactors and facilitate further restarts.

In South Korea, the government said in March that it would accelerate work on five of the 10 nuclear power plants under maintenance so they could be restarted earlier.

Even if the turbulence in the Middle East settles, the supply shock and the fact that LNG deliveries are likely to remain disrupted for years is giving countries "another reason to push for nuclear", said Tatsuya Terazawa, CEO of the Institute of Energy Economics, Japan, a think tank.

The responses of Japan and Taiwan, whose energy policies were reshaped by the Fukushima disaster, are significant, Terazawa said, because they are likely to influence other nations' nuclear stances.

"It has global context," he added.

In some parts of the world, the energy crisis is accelerating a nuclear pivot already under way, fuelled by the power demands of artificial intelligence and data centres.

In the United States, the government has backed the nuclear industry's resurgence through billions of dollars in federal loan guarantees and tax credits.

Before the conflict, experts estimated that nuclear energy in the United States would need to triple by 2050 to meet rising energy demands. China has been building nuclear capacity even faster.

"The Middle East conflict will have long-term implications for nuclear power," said David Brown, director of energy transition research at Wood Mackenzie, a consultancy.

Prolonged supply disruptions and elevated power prices "could unlock a new level of political support".

Yet, he said, nuclear power will come at a premium: "The ability to fund new nuclear capacity and scale new supply chain policies are the policy responses to watch in the months ahead."

For some, the acceleration of nuclear is not welcome news.

On March 11, the 15th anniversary of the Fukushima disaster, the Citizens' Nuclear Information Centre, a watchdog in Japan issued a statement lamenting what it said was a national energy policy prioritising nuclear expansion over public safety.

The fundamental hurdle for many nations is that restarting idled nuclear plants – to say nothing of new construction – is a slow-moving process, unlikely to alleviate current energy supply crunches, at least in the near term.

In Taiwan, even if a nuclear restart were approved in all quarters and sailed through the required inspection and permit process, experts say it would take years to switch the reactors back on.

One of Taiwan's plants has already been dormant for too long to be revived.

The protracted timelines have fuelled criticism that leaders should instead prioritise renewable energy sources that proponents argue are safer, align with existing long-term climate goals, and can be deployed more rapidly.

"Whenever an energy crisis occurs, the topic of nuclear power comes up from the perspective of energy security," said Hajime Matsukubo, secretary-general of the Citizens' Nuclear Information Centre.

Taking into account nuclear facilities' high costs and long construction times, "there is no immediate solution here", he said.

"It's far more rational to invest that money into renewable energy."

Other observers expressed frustration that governments recoiling from nuclear power after Fukushima merely exchanged one set of risks for another, leaving nations reliant on imported fuels.

"We've wasted so much time," said Yang Chia-fa, a founder of the clean energy advocacy group Climate Vanguards, who also works for Taiwan's state-owned power company.

Over the past few years, he has taken part in gatherings across the island to protest the end of nuclear energy.

"If you knew you needed nuclear energy," Yang said, "why did you insist on a nuclear-free homeland in the first place?" — ©2026 The New York Times Company

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