



Ridgeway Briefing:

How the conflict in Iran shapes nuclear energy policy in East Asia

October 2026

At a glance

- Conflict in the Persian Gulf directly impacts the energy security of three East Asian states – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – all of which depend to some extent on imported hydrocarbons.
- The experience of shocks following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has helped prompt each of these three countries to recommit to nuclear energy.
- In all three cases there are also significant geopolitical factors at play shaping nuclear energy policy.

Ridgeway analysis

The impacts of the United States' on-again, off-again conflict with Iran extend far beyond the Middle East. Downstream of the fighting, and of the political and economic turmoil it has prompted, there is an emerging set of additional consequences impacting geopolitics and the global economy. One significant consequence is that a number of East Asian states that had previously been on nuclear-sceptical political trajectories have begun pivoting back towards an embrace of nuclear energy.

This briefing describes how the energy policies of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have been influenced by the conflict in the Gulf, and how that conflict has interacted with other trends (datacentre energy demands, heightened regional tensions) to, in effect, reverse prior assumptions about the relative utility of nuclear energy and renewables.

Post-Fukushima Nuclear Scepticism

In 2011, Japan experienced its strongest-recorded earthquake, which in turn triggered a tsunami that caused extensive damage to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The resulting accident, widely recognised as the worst since Chernobyl, had a long-term structural impact on the nuclear sector, emboldening nuclear critics at roughly the point at which optimism around renewable energy was nearing its own peak. In the years following 2011, countries around the world saw their governments adopt nuclear-sceptical policies in favour of ambitious (some might argue, overly optimistic) targets for renewable energy.

By the early 2020s, the nuclear sceptics seemed to be winning, or at least to be gaining ground. In Taiwan, a long-held aspiration to achieve a 'nuclear free homeland' seemed finally to be within reach; in the Republic of Korea, a decades-long phase-out of nuclear technology had become stated policy; in Japan, successive energy strategies had sought to 'minimise' the role of nuclear within the country's energy mix.

Across East Asia (with the notable, inevitable exception of China, which has always ploughed its own policy furrow) nuclear power seemed to be on a downward slope: it was widely assumed that renewables were the future, with the import of (more or less affordable) natural gas merely an awkward necessity in the near-term.

Enter Donald Trump. The American president's pursuit of conflict with Iran in the Persian Gulf has had obvious and widely reported impacts on global shipping, including on flows of oil and gas from the Gulf States to clients around the world – including in East Asia. As a result, even states geographically far distant from the Strait of Hormuz have seen mounting pressures on their energy security. This Briefing will consider each of the three states mentioned above in turn, tracing their evolving stances on nuclear energy. In each case, while the Iran war is not itself an issue *per se*, the conflict there has nevertheless served to demonstrate, rather forcefully, the fragility of energy mixes based on little more than hydrocarbon imports and hope. As such, events in the Persian Gulf are serving to shape energy policy in the same way that the accident at Fukushima shaped states attitudes toward nuclear energy (in the opposite direction) fifteen years earlier.

Taiwan

The long-standing policy of Taiwan's governing party, the DPP, was that nuclear power should be phased out across the island. In place even before the Fukushima Daichii nuclear accident, the 'nuclear-free homeland' policy sought the progressive closure of each of Taiwan's existing nuclear power plants, a goal which was finally achieved under President Lai Ching-Te with [the closure of the island's final reactor](#), Maanshan, in May 2025. Although this amounted to the fulfilment of a long-held policy position for the DPP, it was not without controversy, and opposition parties (who hold a slim majority in the Legislative Yuan, the nation's legislature) were able to force a national referendum on whether to resume nuclear operations at Maanshan.

The [outcome of that referendum was far from conclusive](#). Almost three quarters of votes cast were in favour of the resuming nuclear power generation at Maanshan, but turnout was low, and the vote therefore failed to pass the required threshold for the result to have legal force. The vote did, however, force further concessions from the DPP government: President Lai publicly accepted that his government would, in principle, be willing to resume nuclear power generation [provided three 'prerequisites' were met](#) – namely:

- assurances around the safety of the reactors involved,
- solutions to the challenges of nuclear waste, and
- social consensus in favour of the move.

Taiwanese political discourse continues to circle around the question of whether the three prerequisites have been met, and whether Taiwan's circumstances had changed sufficiently that the nuclear-free homeland policy should be reversed. [Pro-nuclear voices](#) became increasingly strident, and by November 2025 the government had [softened its line](#) to the point that it had accepted that a restart could be 'feasible'.

Then came the US-Israeli strikes on Iran, and the subsequent restriction of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. In Taiwan with a high level of dependency on imported hydrocarbons and limited resilience within its domestic energy market, the effects were starkly felt in a so-called '[energy shock](#)' as natural gas availability plunged and prices consequently rose.

By March 2026, President Lai had publicly confirmed that a restoration of nuclear power was being considered – a step seen by both supporters and opponents of the nuclear-free homeland policy as a rather [abrupt reversal](#). President Lai's defence of the shift pointed both to the growing demand for energy within Taiwan (fuelled chiefly by AI sector growth) and to external pressures arising from geopolitical developments, especially in the Persian Gulf, impacting the stability of existing energy supplies for the island. (The European Union's [Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism](#) also has an impact here, since that policy impacts the competitiveness

of Taiwanese exports to the EU). State energy company Taipower duly applied to restart operations at Maanshan, and the [reactor could come back online](#) as early as 2028/29.

South Korea

Nuclear scepticism has never been as strong in South Korea as it has been in Taiwan, but the actual extent of government support for nuclear power has ebbed and flowed considerably. President Yoon Suk-Yeol, in power from 2022 until his impeachment in 2025, had sought to reverse his predecessor Moon Jae-In's long-term nuclear phase-out policy, adopted in the 2010s and partly justified using Fukushima as an example. In the presidential election that followed Yoon's removal from office, the opposition DPK candidate, Lee Jae-Myung, defeated the candidate from Yoon's PPP, Kim Moon-Soo. Lee had [campaigning on a nuclear-sceptical platform](#), at one point stating that 'while we cannot completely eliminate nuclear energy overnight, the era of building more reactors should come to an end'.

In government, Lee and his party [initially appeared to prefer a 'pragmatic' approach](#) to energy policy, envisaging a gradual phase-out of nuclear energy in favour of renewables whilst still allowing for investment in some new nuclear technologies, such as small modular reactors. Again, though, external circumstances tempered the government's ambitions. Already by early 2026, the Lee administration had had to accept, in its [11th Basic Plan for Long-term Electricity Supply and Demand](#) that nuclear reactor construction approved by previous administrations would proceed as planned. By July, with it was being suggested by administration officials that the [12th iteration of the Basic plan would include additional nuclear construction](#), possibly even to accelerated timelines, alongside the potential extension of existing plants' lifespans. Officially, the rationale for the altered emphasis included [climate objectives and growing energy demands](#), particularly from the AI sector, but as with Taiwan, the experience of energy instability resulting from [disruption to fossil fuel supplies from the Middle East](#) also played a role, accelerating a pivot that was already coming to be seen as necessary.

Japan

More so even than Taiwan or South Korea, Japan's relationship with nuclear power is complex, shaped in part by the experience of having been the target of nuclear weapons in 1945, but with an extensive, if aging, fleet of nuclear reactors historically underpinning much of the country's energy mix. Japan's strong grass-roots anti-nuclear movement had made relatively little headway prior to Fukushima, but gained significant impetus in the immediate aftermath of that disaster, and the subsequent decade saw a rapid fall in nuclear energy production in Japan as reactors were mothballed and only restarted on a piecemeal basis.

Nuclear scepticism was, understandably, widespread, with even politicians from the dominant LDP, traditionally favourable to nuclear, feeling increasingly free to advance policies that would have amounted to a gradual phase-out (or at least 'minimisation' of nuclear energy within Japan's energy mix. Yet by 2025, structural pressures ([Japan imports 80% of its energy requirements](#)) and the slow rollout of renewable energy meant that attitudes had already begun to shift.

A case in point is Shigeru Ishiba, who served as Prime Minister from 2024-2025, and who had previously been known as a nuclear sceptic, though during his LDP leadership campaign he adopted a [cautiously pro-nuclear stance](#). In government, his administration adopted a balanced approach, neither whole-heartedly pro-nuclear nor implacably opposed. The Japanese government's February 2025 [basic energy plan](#) placed a combined emphasis on renewables and nuclear, eschewing the previous iterations' references to minimising reliance on nuclear energy.

Ishiba's successor Sanae Takaichi, demonstrably more hawkish and conservative than Ishiba, has also proven [noticeably more favourable to nuclear technology](#), at the apparent expense of renewables. The stated (and wildly ambitious) objective is to achieve eventual energy independence for Japan. Regardless of whether or not that proves realistic, [plans to replace existing nuclear power plants](#) are now in train, with up to 14 new reactors anticipated to be online by the 2050s.

Implications

In none of the three cases discussed above is the Iran War the main or only reason for a renewed interest in nuclear; but just as the Fukushima Daichii nuclear accident facilitated a decade-long global pivot away from nuclear energy, so too have energy shocks arising from events in the Strait of Hormuz served to focus minds on the advantages of nuclear energy.

Even without the breakneck race to add datacentre capacity, energy conditions in Japan, South Korea and above all Taiwan were increasingly favouring nuclear power. By placing additional pressure on already strained energy supplies, the Iran War has accelerated a process that was already beginning to seem necessary. Nuclear now looks to be a set component in each state's energy mix for decades to come – whereas even 18 months ago that would have seemed unlikely. This pivot back to nuclear matters for several reasons beyond the core economic question of each state's energy mix.

All three of these states exist in complex geopolitical settings, and nuclear technologies are acutely sensitive. For Japan, where politicians have [begun breaching formerly taboo topics of national defence](#), any discussion around nuclear weapons is bound up in memories of a painful past and fears for an unpredictable present.

For South Korea, the question is bound up in security issues: the question of nuclear latency – of obtaining, in effect, sufficient civil nuclear technology to facilitate the swift development of nuclear weapons should the need arise – is a very live debate.

For Taiwan, too, there is a security angle, though not so much about latency: China would never tolerate such a development in a territory it regards as a breakaway province. Rather, for Taiwan the issue is straightforwardly to do with energy independence. The war in Iran showed Taiwanese politicians all too clearly how vulnerable their energy supplies would be to naval disruption or blockade. Nor has that lesson been lost on China, which [offered Taiwan 'energy security'](#) in March, at the simple cost of what it called alignment with the 'motherland'. Across East Asia, events in the Persian Gulf are combining with more localised concerns to fuel a wider, and potentially long-lasting, return to nuclear.