



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on May 7, 2012

Japan Without Nuclear Power For the First Time Since 1970

Japan's nuclear power woes, stemming from a cautious public hesitant to restore its nuclear sector, could spur an electricity crisis that will cause severe power shortages this summer. As of Sunday, the country has none of its 50 nuclear reactors operating, after its sole operating unit was [suspended](#) due to maintenance planning. In effect, the shutdown of a unit at Hokkaido Electric Power Company's Tomari plant, prompted by mandatory maintenance and burdensome new rules, leaves Japan without a running nuclear reactor for the first time in over four decades.



Tokyo Electric Power Co. [terminated](#) operation of four units at its Fukushima Daiichi plant on April 19 due to havoc wreaked by Japan's March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, which spurred an unwarranted global controversy over the existence of nuclear power. The Great East Japan Earthquake, the most powerful quake ever to have hit Japan, triggered devastating tsunami waves that resulted in crippling the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power plant complex.

The crisis ignited a pretentious global debate that resulted in countless plant closures around the world. In many countries, including the United States, governments enacted costly regulations that have slowed or eliminated altogether the operation of nuclear plants.

In regard to Japan, the world's third largest economy, a wary public has hindered the operation of numerous reactors and has altogether halted the restoration of nuclear production. The country's \$5-trillion economy has become heavily reliant on nuclear power, with nuclear plants delivering nearly 30 percent of its electricity demands. Cabinet officials have largely failed at convincing the Japanese public that it should restore its nuclear production, so instead, plants are being indefinitely closed for "maintenance."

Japan's Asahi newspaper [noted](#) that the public was "wavering between two sources of anxiety" — safety concerns and a faltering belief that the country cannot function without nuclear power. "The public shouldn't just criticize (the government) but make its own decision on energy policy that involves burden and responsibility, such as through cooperating in power saving," the paper affirmed Sunday in an editorial.

"I think it is not easy, but this challenge is worth fighting for," [asserted](#) Junichi Shimizu, a member of Greenpeace Japan. "There is an increased chance of earthquakes in Japan, so that has a significant risk to the Japanese people and the Japanese economy. The only way forward is to rapidly shift the energy source from nuclear to other sources of energy."

But environmental activists are not the sole opponents to Japan's formerly pro-nuclear mentality, as members of the "anti-nuclear movement" marched through Tokyo's streets on Saturday, hailing the



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shutdown of the country's final nuclear reactor. However, this movement has failed to realize the economic repercussions of derailing the country's nuclear industry, says the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which has been staunchly urging the public to support the restoration of production.

Yoshito Sengoku, the DPJ's deputy policy head, affirmed that the absence of nuclear energy will peril Japan's already stale economic state. "We must think ahead to the impact on Japan's economy and people's lives, if all nuclear reactors are stopped. Japan could, in some sense, be committing mass suicide," Sengoku asserted.

Hiromasa Yonekura, chairman of the nation's largest business lobby, echoed Sengoku's sentiment last month in a press conference. "We cannot possibly agree to do the kind of energy saving yet again this year, or every year from now on," Yonekura averred, referencing the public's efforts to shut off air conditioners and shift production lines to operate only on weekends. "The government must bring the nuclear power stations back into operation."

The Japanese government plans to release an estimate later this month detailing expected shortages, which will help develop a plan to conserve energy — likely leading to compulsory restrictions on electricity use. Economists and policymakers are worried that energy shortages could prompt significant fallout for Japan's economic recovery, as power shortages are expected to be severe and more widespread than last summer, when nuclear reactors were still operating in many parts of the country.

Furthermore, some are predicting a long-term economic calumny stemming from rising electricity costs, which could gravely affect production while provoking many companies to export operations to other countries. Many utilities are resorting to coal, oil, and gas-fired plants to keep businesses and households supplied with electricity. Purchasing and importing such fuels are spiking electricity costs, imposing a greater burden on the Japanese economy, which has [contracted](#) in three of the past four years.

"Depending on the weather, power supply could constrain output during the summer," the Bank of Japan reported in a twice-yearly economic report. "But we must be mindful not just of such short-term effects but the chance (the power shortages) could hurt Japan's medium- and long-term growth expectations."

All in all, analysts and media critics are unsure about the country's long-term plan for energy, as ardent public opposition has divided policymakers, which, in turn, has paralyzed Japan's efforts to reignite its much-needed nuclear industry.

Photo of anti-nuclear protest in Japan: AP Images



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