Special Bulletin

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# What Can Be Seen from Comparing the "Wavering" in the Energy Policies of Japan, the United States, and Europe

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Since the beginning of the 2020s—a period marked by dramatic upheavals in the international energy landscape—countries around the world have continued to experience notable shifts in key energy-policy challenges. First, in the midst of the severe global damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, the global momentum toward carbon neutrality accelerated rapidly, making decarbonization the dominant force shaping energy policy worldwide. Then, from the latter half of 2021, global energy prices surged, and with the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the emergence of the "Ukraine crisis," energy prices reached their peak. As a result, energy security swiftly returned as the top priority in global energy policy.

The international energy environment has remained unstable. Following the "Gaza crisis" triggered in October 2023 and the subsequent geopolitical turmoil in the Middle East involving Iran, geopolitical risks and energy security have continued to command global attention. Importantly, the heightened focus on energy security has not diminished the recognition of the importance of decarbonization. Rather, the world has entered a phase in which it must seriously pursue both objectives simultaneously. However, mounting efforts to reconcile these objectives have increasingly resulted in rising energy costs—costs that today's societies are not prepared to absorb easily. Sensitivity to such cost increases is not limited to emerging or developing countries; advanced economies, too—where income disparity has widened—struggle with the widening gap between the ideals and the realities of the energy transition. Further complicating matters is global fragmentation. In the supply chains for critical materials and technologies indispensable to the energy transition, the dominance of specific countries such as China has emerged as a major concern, intertwining economic security with energy security in increasingly visible ways.

In response to these developments, major countries have been urgently deploying policies aimed at safeguarding and strengthening their national interests. While shared patterns are evident—for instance, the re-emphasis on energy security, the difficulties of addressing the gap between energy-transition ideals and practical realities, and the increasing overlap between economic security and energy policy—the more intriguing aspect lies in the different forms of "wavering" or "instability" that have emerged among the leading advanced economies that have long driven the global energy transition: Japan, the United States, and Europe. In what follows, I examine the characteristics of these wavering or instabilities, in the order of the United States, Europe, and Japan.

The most striking feature of the U.S. case is the dramatic policy reversal that occurs with each change of administration. From the Obama administration, to Trump 1.0, to the Biden administration, and now to Trump 2.0, U.S. energy policy has swung like a pendulum with each political transition—and the amplitude of these swings appears to have grown in recent years. The most prominent example is climate policy. The Obama administration played a central role in the formation of the Paris Agreement; the Trump 1.0 administration withdrew from it; the Biden administration rejoined; and Trump 2.0 has once again announced withdrawal—this time, even from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change itself early this year.

It is no exaggeration to say that the United States has undergone 180-degree policy reversals every four years on major strategic issues, and these shifts far exceed what might ordinarily be described as mere "wavering" or "instability." In the realm of clean-energy promotion—and, conversely, in the policy stance toward fossil fuels—the changes that have accompanied recent political transitions have been nothing short of dramatic. As a consequence, the world has repeatedly been forced to adjust to abrupt swings in U.S. energy policy. Nevertheless, the United States remains a very resource-rich energy powerhouse, and this fundamental reality continues to shape the deeper currents of its energy policy and energy landscape, regardless of the administration in power. Even administrations that do not explicitly prioritize fossil fuels understand well the enormous economic and strategic benefits that the United States has reaped from the massive post-shale-revolution expansion in domestic oil and gas production. No administration is unaware of how profoundly this surge has contributed to U.S. economic performance, societal development, and national interests. Conversely, the U.S. market is one in which economic principles tend to prevail. Thus, no matter how forcefully an administration may call for increased production, private-sector actors will not respond if the underlying economics are unfavorable. Situations in which "the flute plays but no one dances" are not unusual. Yet, regardless of the actual outcomes or degree of policy implementation, the fact remains that political turnover in the United States produces substantial shifts in energy policy. These shifts, in turn, generate significant "instability" with repercussions both domestically and internationally. This appears to be one of the defining characteristics of the current U.S. energy-policy environment.

By contrast, the "wavering" or "instability" seen in Europe appears to arise not from political turnover but from the collision between lofty ideals and harsh socioeconomic realities. From its inception, the European project has seemingly been driven by ideals—overcoming historical conflicts among sovereign states and pursuing deeper regional integration. In the field of climate policy, Europe has consistently led the world, setting ambitious targets and deploying sophisticated regulatory frameworks. Its collective approach has enhanced its energy security, while its rule-making capacity has served as a strategic means of global influence. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Europe once again demonstrated its leadership in shaping and articulating strategic policy concepts by promptly announcing the "REPowerEU" plan, a comprehensive initiative designed to reconcile energy security with decarbonization.

However, Europe has increasingly struggled with high energy prices, inflation, and eroding industrial competitiveness since the Ukraine crisis. Confronted with these acute pressures, Europe—while maintaining its ambitious goals—has begun searching urgently for ways to defend its economic and industrial base. Its December 2025 decision to reconsider the planned 2035 ban on new internal-combustion-engine vehicle sales seems to be a symbolic example of such recalibration. In short, Europe's wavering or instability stems from the weight of reality pressing against its ideals.

Japan, too, has experienced its own form of "wavering" or "instability," as evidenced most clearly in the evolution of its Strategic Energy Plans. In the Sixth Strategic Energy Plan, approved by the Cabinet in 2021, the government emphasized the simultaneous pursuit of "S+3E." However, in practice, the overriding policy priority was the achievement of carbon neutrality, with decarbonization functioning as the principal driver of Japan's energy strategy. By contrast, in the Seventh Strategic Energy Plan, approved by the Cabinet in February of last year, energy security—particularly the stable supply of electricity—was explicitly designated as the most critical policy objective.

Despite these forms of "wavering" or "instability" and policy shifts, the author maintains that energy security has consistently remained the most fundamental and enduring element underlying Japan's energy policy. Unlike the United States, Japan is a resource-poor nation, and unlike Europe, it cannot rely on collective, region-wide approaches. Japan must confront its structurally vulnerable energy supply-and-demand conditions on its own as an independent island country. The electricity-supply tightness experienced in 2022 prompted Japan—earlier than many other countries—to recognize the critical importance of securing a stable electricity supply, leading to a strengthening of related policy measures.

Coupled with emerging circumstances such as growing electricity demand driven by the new wave of digital transformation, this recognition became an important factor behind the policy shift toward “maximum utilization” of nuclear power. Furthermore, even while experiencing its own policy “wavering” or “instabilities,” Japan has been among the first to articulate a strategic principle emphasizing the need for “multiple pathways” in strengthening energy security and advancing decarbonization—pathways that reflect the differing national circumstances across countries. Today, Europe itself finds it increasingly difficult to deny the validity of this approach. In this respect, Japan’s conceptual stance has exhibited little wavering or instability. As a nation with scarce energy resources, Japan may find that its very survival depends on suppressing policy volatility as much as possible and pursuing measured, steady responses to the challenges ahead.

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