

Nation's security weakness exposed

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Due to an operational error that affected CPC Corp, Taiwan's (CPC) natural gas supply to Taiwan Power Co's (Taipower) Datan Power Station late on Tuesday afternoon, large areas of Taiwan experienced power outages as Taipower restricted the electricity supply district by district throughout the nation.

It was not until 9:40pm that power was fully restored, after business owners had suspended their businesses, while others had been caught in elevators, production lines had been closed down and communication networks had been interrupted. The situation was reported by the news media, and opposition parties made a big fuss over it.

Minister of Economic Affairs Lee Chih-Kung (李智雄) took political responsibility for the blackout and stepped down on Tuesday evening, while Premier Lin Chuan (林錫山) instructed the Ministry of Economic Affairs to launch a detailed investigation into the causes and to apportion responsibility, while President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) apologized to the public on behalf of the government.

On Wednesday afternoon, Tsai addressed a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Central Standing Committee meeting, saying that "the power supply is not only a matter of living standards, it is also a matter of national security."

Earlier this month, Taiwan experienced a power shortage after a transmission tower was toppled by a typhoon.

However, this time it was a flawed operation at a natural gas supply facility that disrupted the operations of an entire power station and exposed the whole nation, region by region, to emergency power supply.

The problem facing the nation is a vulnerable power system that can be paralyzed by natural disasters or human oversight. If the nation continues to face this problem in the wrong way, it will be facing a great systemic risk.

That the president addressed the issue in person is a sign of how much pressure the government has come under as a result of the power outage, in particular from businesses, a group that always pays particular attention to power shortages.

As for the cause of the power outage, CPC says that personnel from instrument equipment manufacturer Lumax International Corp did not switch the control system from automatic to manual while replacing components as standard operating procedures require, causing the system to malfunction and automatically close two electric valves, shutting off gas supplies.

Lumax, on the other hand, issued a long statement saying that its personnel were only helping with an installation at a metering station and that CPC personnel were in charge of the operation.

The Cabinet's administrative investigation will have to find the cause — and passing the buck cannot be tolerated. An administrative investigation is not a witch hunt, nor is it a search for a scapegoat. Instead, it is a search for the devil hidden in the details.

If the CPC and Taipower are unable to resolve the systemic risk, it becomes even more urgent that Lin brings in an external committee to avoid departmentalism in connection with the inspection that he has requested of the power supply and transmission system.

“Green” energy and a nuclear-free homeland are two of the Tsai administration's main goals.

However, during the energy transition period and in particular during summer when power demand is higher, perhaps it would be appropriate to consider keeping a moderate nuclear power reserve and improving nuclear power operational security, thereby maintaining a certain energy reserve and ensuring that the effects of any unforeseen emergency situation would not be too severe.

If that is not done and the government insists on a more distant goal, which in the meantime will mean power restrictions for all Taiwanese while the existing power stations remain unused, how will it be possible to improve the economy?

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Furthermore, to avoid a situation where a single incident can affect the whole nation, a distributed power grid should quickly be created to spread the risk.

In just a few weeks, the nation has experienced power restrictions caused by a toppled transmission tower and a power plant being taken offline. These incidents have not only caused complaints from the general public, but have also eroded the willingness of businesses to invest.

It is worth celebrating that neither the big power outage on July 29, 1999, nor the recent power outage caused social unrest, a sign of Taiwan's stability and maturity. The 1999 power outage occurred just after 11pm, and Tuesday's incident occurred in the early evening; still, neither led to looting. Instead, there are many reports of people helping each other, which is an expression of the strength of Taiwanese, an internal soft power.

For many years, certain media outlets have been fond of reporting on confrontational issues and predicting Taiwan's demise, while at the same time intentionally inflating China's rise and embroidering its domestic corruption.

By comparison, it would appear as if Taiwan was falling behind, but the fact is that whether it was under the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in 1999 or under the DPP today, Taiwan is up to the test.

It is indeed like Tsai said: Power supply is not only a matter of living standards, it is also a matter of national security.

When a major power outage occurs during times of peace, it is only a major incident, as it means that there is still time to address the exposed national security weakness.

An annual exercise directed by the National Security Council that took place early this month included safeguarding infrastructure facilities. If that was an exercise, this was the real thing.

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Although the departments involved were prompt in their response, with the power supply being restored across the nation in five hours and the crisis management working as it should, it still would not have been possible to take preventive measures and move ahead of the enemy, which means that it was not quite a success. One could imagine that another similar crisis might break the confidence in Taiwan's economy.

Tsai's demand for a comprehensive review of all major infrastructure facilities and the formulation of a security plan should therefore be seen as part of war preparations. The only thing allowed is a success — failure is not an option.

Leaving this weakness unaddressed and open to enemy attack will have unthinkable consequences.

Translated by Perry Svensson

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