

Bans should be lifted in one go

Written by Tzou Jiing-wen 蔡景文

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This year will be a critical one for President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), who will need to accelerate the realization of her policy agenda.

In the past few weeks, Tsai has overcome the political tests of the four referendums, a recall and a by-election. She should now put these behind her and use the momentum they provided to move forward. Also, next year, Taiwan will need to brace for a bitterly fought campaign for the 2024 presidential election, when rational discussion on national policy will be put on hold, as politicians prioritize attracting voters. There is, therefore, no better time than now for the president to go full steam ahead in implementing her policies.

In terms of national development strategy, the top priority in breaking away from China's blockade should be promoting increased participation in the international economic and trade system. The first domino that needs to be toppled to facilitate this is the lifting of a ban on food imports from five Japanese prefectures that was implemented after the 2011 Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant meltdown. This month is the final stage of decisionmaking for the government to address the issue.

Taiwan is beyond the point of discussing whether it should import agricultural products and food from the prefectures: Based on scientific standards and to eliminate trade barriers, there is no longer a dispute over whether to lift the ban. The only question that remains is whether it should be partially or completely lifted.

Taiwan has submitted an application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and if it wants to join the bloc any time soon, or at all, it will need to demonstrate to all CPTPP member states that it is ready.

There is no better way to do this than to entirely lift the ban on food imports from the five prefectures.

Taiwan's blanket ban on food imports from Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi, Gunma and Chiba was implemented in 2011 during the administration of then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九). Nine categories of food imported from Japan have been required to be checked for radiation.

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The measures were indeed necessary in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

However, in the following decade, when other countries were gradually lifting restrictions, not only has Taiwan declined to review the ban, it went in the opposite direction, announcing in 2015 the imposition of more restrictions, demanding that all foods imported from Japan be accompanied by a certificate of origin.

Moreover, specific foods from specific regions in Japan now require a radioactivity test certificate and must go through more rigorous inspections. It can be said that almost all food imports from Japan are banned except for alcohol.

By the time Tsai came to power in 2016, the authorities had known for a long time that the results of radioactive material testing carried out by the public and private sectors on the foods from Fukushima and the surrounding area has been negative for many years. Taiwan and Japan had also continued to hold dialogues and negotiate on trade issues.

However, in 2018, the passage of a referendum on imposing a blanket ban on all food from the five prefectures blocked the possibility of rational discussion until 2020, when the validity of the referendum result expired.

Unfortunately for the government, one of the questions in last year's referendums, on whether to ban imports of pork containing residues of ractopamine, yet again made the government reluctant to broach the question of whether to lift the ban on Japanese food imports.

All four referendum proposals were rejected on Dec. 18 last year. On Monday last week, Democratic Progressive Party candidate Lin Ching-yi (林錫山) won the legislative by-election in Taichung's second electoral district and independent Legislator Freddy Lim (林錫山) survived a recall vote in Taipei's fifth electoral district.

The Tsai administration seems to have finally weathered all the crises, but five years of

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precious time has also slipped through its fingers.

Compared with other countries, where lifting bans on Japanese food imports has been a gradual process from a partial to a complete lifting, Taiwan's domestic politics has slowed the process.

If Taiwan wants to act in accordance with international rules, there is no more room for taking time to address the issue: The ban must be lifted in one go.

Singapore and the US last year completely lifted their bans. Taiwan has no shortage of examples to follow, especially when the Japanese government has repeatedly expressed its openness to Taiwan joining the CPTPP.

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