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A case study in the power of strong central government support for storage—and a warning.

Author"s note: This marks the third entry in our globetrotting series profiling the world"s top storage markets. The first entry explores how storage developers tackle the volatility in the U.K. market. The second installment delves into why Germany"s residential sector thrives as large-scale storage stalls.South Korea proved itself the dark-horse winner of the global energy storage deployment race of 2018.

The nation had long been central to the storage industry as the home of two top lithium-ion manufacturers, LG Chem and Samsung SDI. But there wasn’t much to discuss on the deployment front.

Last year, a hearty government incentive kicked off a storage installation gold rush, which thrust South Korea ahead of the U.S. for annual installed energy storage capacity. It delivered 1.07 gigawatt-hours for the year according to Wood Mackenzie data, and is on track to beat that in 2019.

The peninsular country’s geopolitical circumstances make storage strategically useful in a way that few others countries have experienced. The presence of a domestic battery manufacturing base converts storage development into a national economic imperative.

With strong government involvement, South Korea accelerated its storage market in a way that sent ripples around the world. The deployment boom brought challenges of its own. Now policymakers must confront whether they rationed economic fuel for a long, sustainable burn, or doused the flames for a short-lived but brilliant burst.

South Korea"s physical landscape sets the operating parameters for the energy system.

The nation functions as an islanded grid, even though it’s attached to the mainland. The adversarial regime to the north precludes cooperation on electrical generation and transmission. The ocean surrounds the rest of the country, enveloping a number of islands, which have to balance even smaller grids.

As such, South Korea must provide for itself. If it follows through on commitments to build a high share of renewable electricity over the long term, this will create a strong driver for storage to balance intermittency internally (not unlike the U.K., or Israel, another grid islanded by geopolitics more than geography).

Renewables have not yet reached enough scale to make batteries a necessity. The government hopes to get to

10 percent renewable electricity in 2023 and 20 percent by 2030. In the meantime, the grid runs largely on nuclear power and fossil fuels, but the landscape has been stingy with ancient dinosaur juice. All of those fuels have to be imported.

As the eighth-largest energy consumer, South Korea had to become a top-five importer of liquefied natural gas, coal and crude oil, according to the Energy Information Administration.

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