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## SCOPE: ITER project is in danger of collapse

The failure to decide on a site for an international nuclear fusion project at a meeting in Vienna late last month by the six parties involved has left the \$12 billion project in danger of collapse.

Japan, the European Union (EU), the United States, Russia, China and South Korea have been discussing whether the world's first sustained nuclear fusion reactor should be situated in Japan or France.

At the vice ministerial-level Vienna meeting, Japan and the EU insisted on their own plans to host the prototype reactor, dubbed International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), ending the one-day meeting with no resolution to the problem.

Japan wants the reactor to be built in the village of Rokkasho in Aomori Prefecture, northern Japan, while the EU has selected the town of Cadarache in southern France as its candidate.

At a ministerial-level meeting in the United States late last year, Washington and Seoul supported Japan, but China and Russia backed the EU.

China expressed concern over Japan being used as a venue, saying the country has too many earthquakes, while Russia noted that operating expenses, including power rates, are high in Japan.

"No resolution is possible without overcoming this rivalry," said Satoru Otake, head of the Fusion Science Development Department at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

He said Japan's hopes depend on a change of mind either by China or Russia, or on their adopting a neutral position.

Education minister Takeo Kawamura visited China in January to urge officials there to support Japan, saying there is a need to create an international research base in Asia, and also offered to allocate some of the positions at the plant earmarked for Japanese to Chinese nationals.

Kawamura and Senior Vice Minister Yamato Inaba also visited Russia earlier this year on a similar mission.

But both China and Russia reiterated in January that they are supporting the EU.

Relations between Japan and China have been cooling since Jan. 1 when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine for the war dead, which also enshrines Class-A war criminals including wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo.

In contrast, relations between China and France are said to be in good shape, according to a high-ranking official at the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Chinese President Hu Jintao visited France earlier this year as part of his official visit to Europe -- the first since he assumed office -- and was welcomed at the airport by President Jacques Chirac.

Russia initially supported Japan but then changed its mind, saying this was for scientific and technological reasons, but Japanese sources said it is because President Vladimir Putin is giving priority to relations with the EU.

France is also trying to win over Japan's supporters, believing it has an equal opportunity to host the project, a French government source said.

To break the impasse, compromise proposals have emerged, including having separate locations for the experimental reactor and related facilities, but Akio Yuki, a senior education ministry official, said these will not solve the problem.

"Both countries want the experimental reactor itself. None of the compromise proposals has come up with a winning formula for breaking the impasse," he said.

"Unless the matter is resolved through the U.S. presidential election (in November), the project could collapse," said a lawmaker from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

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