

No end in sight for nuclear squabble

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The decision on a site for a controversial nuclear fusion project has been delayed by a further three weeks, it emerged this weekend.

A technical meeting on ITER (the international thermonuclear reactor) was held in Vienna on Saturday but experts left having decided that another get together will be necessary on March 12 and 13, in the same city.

Prior to Saturday's meeting many had hoped that a final decision would be taken at ministerial level in March.

A commission spokesman said on Monday that a March decision was "still possible but not very likely at this stage."

He added "We made some progress and a decision was taken to carry out further comparisons between the two possible sites."

The choice is between the French town of Cadarache and the northern Japanese village Rokkasho-mura.

Japan has said that if no agreement is reached it would be prepared to share the site with France.

But France says that if it does not win outright it wants to go it alone with EU money.

Many think that ITER has become a chance for international players to air their Iraqi war grievances.

The USA is supporting its war ally Japan and is firmly opposed to a bid from the vociferously anti-war French.

Similarly, China and Russia gain some anti-American cred by backing France.

The spokesman confirmed that "The USA remains committed to supporting the Japanese side".

He said that South Korea was also supporting Japan, but would not stand in the way if it looked like Cadarache was winning.

Canada pulled out of talks altogether in December.

Opinions are polarised as to whether or not nuclear fusion offers a viable source of electricity production for the future.

Supporters say it provides an attractive long-term option, because the basic material (water) needed for its generation is in plentiful supply, and fusion reactors would not produce fissile materials that could be used in nuclear weapons.

But a 2003 report from Britain's Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology claims that the soonest fusion could become commercially viable is 2043.

Opponents say it would take even longer than this, with green groups pointing out that in 1950 scientists working on nuclear fusion said they needed another 50 years - and are still asking for 50 more years.