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Japan calls EU's proposal to end dispute over international nuclear fusion plant "out of the question"

The European Union's proposal to end a dispute over the location of a multinational nuclear-fusion reactor by offering Japan a small, shared role at a France-based plant is "out of the question," the head of Japan's negotiating team said Monday.

Discussions between the EU, Japan, the United States, Russia, South Korea and China over where to build the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, or ITER, have reached an impasse.

A meeting in Vienna earlier this month ended in disagreement and raised questions about the fate of the 1.3-trillion-yen (US\$13-billion; ¥10-billion) project to develop a new energy source over the next 35 years.

Satoru Ohtake, the director for fusion energy at Japan's Education, Science and Technology Ministry, criticized the European side for refusing to consider any result that doesn't let France host the reactor.

"The EU's proposal is out of the question," Ohtake told The Associated Press. Tokyo found EU negotiators' attitude at this month's meeting to be "somewhat insulting" because they were so unwilling to compromise, he said.

The EU strategy, which has won backing from China and Russia, is to have the main reactor based in Cadarache, southern France. It also calls for building a test facility for fusion materials and smaller fusion devices in Japan, as a consolation to Tokyo for dropping its bid.

Ohtake called Japan's counteroffer "far more generous" to the side that loses, but refused to disclose details about it. He said the two sides' proposals for a compromise should be fair enough that a coin toss could decide it.

Tokyo's offer, which has the support of the United States and South Korea, is expected to include promises to pay for more than half of the total construction cost, which is estimated at US\$5 billion (¥3.8 billion). Japan is proposing the site of Rokkasho on the northern tip of Japan's main island of Honshu.

EU officials in Japan refused to comment except to say the process would take time.

Nuclear fusion has been seen as the most promising and safest alternative to pollution-producing fossil fuels.

Fusion, which mimics the power of the sun and stars, produces no greenhouse gas emissions and only low levels of radioactive waste.

The reactor would run on an isotope of hydrogen, an abundant source of fuel that can be extracted from sea water, and would work by ramming tiny atoms together at extremely high temperatures. When the atoms fuse into a plasma they release energy that can be harnessed to generate electricity.

Because fusion reactors don't consume uranium or plutonium _ the fuel of conventional, fission reactors _ and don't require a nuclear chain reaction, there is little risk of a radioactive meltdown.

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