

E.U. Tensions Surface Over Radical Nuclear Project

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BRUSSELS, Sept 24 (AFP) - The European Union reaffirmed its desire Friday to get broad international backing for a revolutionary nuclear energy project, the subject of rival bids from France and Japan.

But sources said the EU was also growing anxious about delays to choosing a site for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), and might in the last resort go ahead at its own location.

"Because of the global importance of fusion research, there is a consensus that international cooperation should be on the broadest possible basis and involve as many partners as possible," EU research ministers said in a statement after regular talks.

The statement left open the question of which partners the EU was seeking to build ITER, the world's first prototype reactor for nuclear fusion, which is billed as a clean, safe, inexhaustible energy source of the future.

A diplomat with the EU's Dutch presidency said the bloc was still keen to work within the six-party ITER framework, which also embraces China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States.

But French junior research minister Francois d'Aubert came away from the EU talks with a different interpretation.

"The member states have backed an international approach that is as broad as possible... with as many countries as possible," he told reporters.

"But if we don't get there, we won't get there," d'Aubert said, while also rejecting any talk of "shutting the door on Japan or the United States".

The United States and South Korea support the Japanese site, in the northern village of Rokkasho-mura, to host ITER.

But the European bloc wants to build the reactor in the southern French town of Cadarache, near Marseille, and has won support from China and Russia.

The Dutch presidency is seeking to settle the long-running disagreement over ITER's location by the end of November.

The EU's long-time chief negotiator on the project, Philippe Busquin, turned up the pressure at the start of this month by recommending that the EU should study the possibility of launching its own project, diplomats said.

Before standing down as EU research commissioner, Busquin said in a letter to the Dutch presidency that "several partners have a very strong preference" for Cadarache, and "would support an initiative by the EU to unblock the situation".

According to one EU source, China and Russia could join the European project, and other interested countries such as Canada and India would also be welcome.

The project could be launched without digging further into EU funds, he added.

That is a key demand of Germany and Britain, as well as the Dutch, and was spelt out again in the research ministers' statement.

Forty percent of the estimated 4.7 billion euros (5.8 billion dollars) it will cost to build the first ITER reactor would come out of the EU budget.

France has proposed to double its own contribution to some 914 million euros, or about 20 percent of the total.

D'Aubert argued the project could be launched with Russia paying 10 percent of the costs and China a further 10 percent. Other partners could be invited to contribute to costs too, he said.

Wrangling over the decision is expected to focus on a meeting of the six ITER partners in Vienna in mid-October, hosted by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

D'Aubert said a subsequent meeting of the EU ministers on November 25 would be "decisive".

Busquin's successor at the European Commission, Louis Michel, vowed that EU governments would refuse to "leave this impasse to fester" and would stay united behind the French bid.



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