



Row over ITER location ready to boil over

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In the tug-of-war between Japan and the European Union over a site for an experimental nuclear fusion reactor, France now appears to have gone on the offensive against Japan, whose ministries are marching to different drummers.

Talks on where to build the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor stalled again after both Japan and the EU peppered each other with new offers for the ITER project.

The ITER issue is likely to come up during a scheduled summit meeting between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and French President Jacques Chirac, who is scheduled to visit Japan on Saturday. But it will not be an easy task for the two leaders to find a way to break the deadlock.

The ITER is an international project aimed at developing energy from nuclear reactions similar to those that power the sun. In addition to Japan and the EU, four other countries--China, Russia, South Korea and the United States--have participated in the 1.3 trillion yen project.

Two candidate sites for the ITER projects are Rokkashomura, Aomori Prefecture, and Cadarache, France. Negotiations on where to locate the reactor began in June 2003, since which the United States and South Korea have supported the Japanese proposal while the EU, Russia and China have backed the French site.

France, which set up a post of extraordinary ambassador to the ITER project, has made a national commitment to becoming the chosen site of the reactor.

In June, Koizumi and Chirac had talks in Sea Island, Ga., where leaders from Group of Eight major nations met. According to a Foreign Ministry official, Koizumi had a hard time changing subjects during the summit talks as Chirac seemed determined to stick to the subject of the ITER project.

Skillful bargaining also seems to be part of the battle. In November, overseas media quoted a source close to the EU as saying Japan gave up inviting the ITER to Rokkashomura. Senior officials of the Education, Science and Technology Ministry naturally were upset and immediately denied the report, saying it was completely groundless.

In the upcoming talks between Koizumi and Chirac scheduled to be held Sunday, the French president is again highly likely to take an aggressive stance on the ITER issue.

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Straining ties

Tokyo presented a plan on roles of host and non-host countries in the project at a vice ministerial meeting between Japan and the EU in September. Apart from talks

on the location issue, negotiations at the administrative level reportedly continue to focus on possible plans for role sharing.

Japan appears to be lagging behind France. This perhaps is due to a lack of unity between the government and ruling parties.

The education ministry has made active efforts to promote Rokkashomura as the ITER site, but many officials of the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry reportedly are reluctant to host the ITER project.

"We should place priority on measures to fend off expanding energy consumption in countries such as China and India, instead of spending a huge amount of money on a project it's said will be completed in 50 years," one bureaucrat said.

In the Finance Ministry, some officials are increasingly concerned about mounting costs due to the battle over the site.

Furthermore, the territorial dispute over Takeshima island has cast a shadow on the alliance between Japan, South Korea and the United States. As the dispute escalated when a Shimane Prefectural Assembly ordinance designated Feb.22 as a commemorative day for the island, some government officials have been apprehensive that France could take advantage of the deteriorating relationship between Japan and South Korea and push Seoul to back the French site.

However, as the education ministry reportedly considers that EU nations other than France are not so enthusiastic about the ITER project, ministry officials are likely to continue administrative-level negotiations to narrow the gap between host and non-host countries.

On Thursday, Vice Education Minister Akio Yuki reiterated Japan's wish to host the ITER under the current six-party framework.

"The EU set a deadline of July (to settle the ITER dispute). Japan also has no intention to draw out the issue and wants to find a solution as soon as possible," Yuki said at a press conference.

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