

Editorial

[Top](#)[Home](#) > [Editorial](#)[Weather](#) | [Editorials in English](#)

Japan has key role in ITER project

The Yomiuri Shimbun

The dispute over which nation should host the world's first nuclear fusion reactor has been settled after a contest lasting several years between Japan and the European Union for the position.

During a ministerial meeting in Moscow on Tuesday, the EU and five nations agreed that the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor would be built in Cadarache, southern France.

A nuclear fusion reactor could serve as an artificial sun on the Earth. Such a plant is expected to produce inexhaustible energy. However, there still are a number of technical problems to be surmounted in an attempt to use a fusion reactor for practical purposes. Given this, it is essential to study how to clear these hurdles, using the ITER project as a basis for achieving the goal.

The ITER would be a gigantic facility. The main part of its reactor would be comparable to the Great Buddha of Nara in size. The facility also would house a mass of precision machines used to control the colossal amount of energy it would generate.

It will take 10 years to build the reactor and cost about 1.3 trillion yen to construct and operate the facility before it is dismantled 35 years later.

If they combine their expertise and financial contributions, the participants in the project will be able to develop research on how to solve related technical problems.

Japan and the EU should closely cooperate with the other participants--the United States, Russia, China and South Korea--to develop the project. They should work out the details of the project as soon as possible, to break ground for the reactor.

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Many benefits on offer

Despite its concession to the EU in the dispute over the location of the reactor, Japan has gained assurances from the other ITER participants that it will reap rich benefits from the project.

The EU will pay half of the 500 billion yen bill for the ITER's construction. Japan and the other four nations will shoulder 10 percent of the remaining costs each. This country also will receive 20 percent of orders for necessary construction work, obtaining a portion of the share allotted to the EU. All this will provide Japan with an opportunity to gain practical experience in building a nuclear fusion reactor.

The envisaged ITER Organization will be headed by a Japanese, and 20-30 percent of the employees at the international institution also will be Japanese.

Some facilities related to the ITER project also will be built in Japan, including a research laboratory that will receive data on the operation of the reactor through a high-speed communications network and analyze the reactor's condition. The EU will cover half of the costs to be incurred by building such facilities in this nation.

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Japan has a greater share of work to do in operating the ITER than the other nations. This means that Japan must shoulder a greater responsibility for the project. The government must work with the EU to ensure that cooperation among all ITER participants is maintained during the project.

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Smooth cooperation vital

The U.S. administration still has not gained consent from the Congress concerning the United States' share of the costs of the ITER project. The United States quit the ITER project at one point because of objections to it from Congress. It is unclear whether the United States will be willing to cooperate with the other ITER participants.

Meanwhile, China and South Korea reportedly are dissatisfied with the preferential arrangements awarded to Japan despite the fact that the three nations will pay the same share of the ITER costs.

For years, Japan has been in the forefront of nuclear fusion research. By taking advantage of its accumulated expertise, this nation should contribute to the project in the form of technical and personnel assistance. This is essential to gain support from the other ITER participants for Japan's position in the project.

To make up for losses suffered by giving up its bid to host the ITER in Rokkashomura, Aomori Prefecture, the government should also take necessary steps at home. For years, the northeastern village has cooperated with the central government in promoting this nation's nuclear energy program. With this in mind, the government should reward Rokkashomura for its years of cooperation, for instance, by making the village home to facilities related to the ITER project.

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Editorial

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[Japan has key role in ITER project](#) (Jun.29)

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[Data leak shows need for virus crackdown](#) (Jun.24)

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[Japan, ROK must work for true understanding](#) (Jun.21)

[Local govts not making case on education](#) (Jun.20)

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