

After Huawei, spotlight on China's role in UK nuclear power

21 August 2020, by Jean-Baptiste Oubrier



China General Nuclear Power (CGN) is working alongside France's EDF in the construction of a nuclear power plant at Hinkley Point, in southwest England, which is due to be completed in 2025

After Britain ordered the phased removal of Huawei from its 5G network, attention has now switched to China's role in other areas of the UK, particularly its involvement in key nuclear power projects.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries are already fraught as a result of Beijing's introduction of a controversial security law on former British colony Hong Kong.

But the rows over first Huawei and now the nuclear issue are adding to the pressure.

Among those leading the charge against China is former Conservative party leader Iain Duncan Smith, who wants China's role in Britain's nuclear future to be reassessed.

"Our energy policy is in the hands of the Chinese," the Tory MP said in a recent article in British daily, The Telegraph.

"Just in that one sector, we have complete domination by China when we should be strategically reviewing it."

China General Nuclear Power (CGN) is working alongside France's EDF in the construction of a nuclear power plant at Hinkley Point, in southwest England, which is due to be completed in 2025.

The pair are also awaiting formal approval for a new plant at Sizewell on the Suffolk coast in eastern England.

In both cases, CGN is the minority partner.

But in another project, the Bradwell [nuclear reactor](#) in southeastern England, it is CGN which will hold the majority stake.

CGN has not indicated whether it plans to pull the plug itself on its UK nuclear involvement.

But the group is investing £3.8 billion (\$4.9 billion, 4.2 billion euros) and supporting thousands of jobs in the sector.

Steve Thomas, a professor of [energy policy](#) at London's University of Greenwich, said CGN's nuclear ambitions in Britain were "an important step" in showcasing the Chinese group's technology to the rest of the world.

"All CGN wanted from the UK was the prestige and endorsement," he told AFP.

With China the lead partner in the Bradwell project, Thomas said UK approval "will be a [political decision](#)".

Blocking the plant's construction could threaten CGN's involvement in Hinkley or Sizewell, he added.

"It depends how angry the Chinese government is..."

and whether it wants to punish the UK," Thomas said.

Such action would be extremely costly also in terms of numbers, with the final bill for Hinkley estimated at up to £22.5 billion. © 2020 AFP

But with political pressure from within its ranks, it remains to be seen whether the Chinese will help to deliver it.

Nuclear importance

Should the Chinese exit Hinkley, a British state-bailout may be needed to salvage the project, which is key to the government's long-term energy plans.

It wants to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, using nuclear power to help meet the country's electricity needs.

Britain's ambitions won a boost Monday from Hitachi, when the Japanese group announced it was ready to relaunch a nuclear power project in northwest Wales.

The Wylfa Newydd development on Anglesey island, spearheaded by Hitachi's Horizon Nuclear subsidiary, was put on hold early last year because of wrangling over financing.

It is now awaiting the publication of a new government energy strategy, which could include a more attractive financing model, including sharing the cost with consumers via a levy.

Japanese rival Toshiba, though, has not revised its 2018 decision to pull the plug on a nuclear power plant project in Cumbria, northwest England.

The government is banking on renewable energy such as wind power to meet its target, moving away from coal, but with a continued reliance on nuclear.

Currently, nuclear provides some 20 percent of the country's electricity, a ratio that ministers are keen to maintain, even as existing plants come to the end of their lifespan.

"New nuclear has an important role to play in providing reliable, low-carbon [power](#) as part of our future energy mix as we tackle climate change," the government said this week.

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