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14 septembre 2015

Chinese nuclear plant may be built in UK sooner than planned

Source : ECNS

<https://www.ecns.cn/business/2015/09-12/180903.shtml>

Chinese nuclear plant may be built in UK sooner than planned

2015-09-12 08:33 chinadaily.com.cn *Editor : Wang Fan*

A Chinese-designed nuclear power plant could be built in the UK quicker than expected as a result of delays experienced at Hinkley Point project, which is to be built by France's EDF Energy, said Keith Burnett, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sheffield.

The potential site for the Chinese-designed nuclear power plant is at Bradwell, in Essex, and the forthcoming visit to China by the British Chancellor George Osborne will be focused on discussing the details of the Bradwell project, Burnett said.

"Our chancellor has said that we can't wait forever for Hinkley Point and he is going to China next week. He is signalling as far as he could that the possibilities to build with China is going up the agenda rapidly."

The China visit led by Osborne will be followed by visits by officials from the UK's Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Department of Business and Innovation ; talks will be completed before the state visit by President Xi Jinping in October. This series of events lead to the increased probability of rapid progress for UK-China cooperation on nuclear power generation, Burnett said.

The EDF-led Hinkley Point project has already attracted political support from the British government as the first in a new generation of UK nuclear power stations, but announcements by EDF earlier this month about potential delays has made industry experts and the UK government consider alternative options.

One of these options is to accelerate progress on a Chinese-led nuclear plant project, and Burnett said he believes this is a viable option because of the proven efficiency and speed of the Chinese nuclear sector.

Burnett has been a key figure pushing forward the UK's nuclear sector development, and especially through his involvement with the Nuclear Advanced Manufacturing Research Center.

The Nuclear AMRC, led by the University of Sheffield and the University of Manchester, was established in 2009 to help the UK's nuclear industry firms improve their technology through research and development and expertise sharing.

The Nuclear AMRC is currently in discussions with various Chinese nuclear firms, helping them to localize their technology, and in the process incorporate aspects of the British supply chain, for both the UK market and later on potential exports.

"The reason is obvious. China is building and is able to build, and for a country like us, we stand in admiration."

"We thought if we work with a company like EDF, which will still be important, we thought we were going with a capability that's more rapid, but they have signalled delays, so now there will be a revaluation of the options, and one option is why not go with the Chinese build," he said.

The Hinkley Point project has encountered setbacks both on a technical level and financial level.

On a technical level, the European Pressurized Reactor technology, which will be used to build Hinkley Point, came under scrutiny from the French regulators earlier this year, because the pressure vessel of the Flamanville nuclear plant in France that uses the same technology, has shown signs of problems.

On a financial level, EDF has not yet announced their solution for closing the funding gap after the French investor Areva withdrew its 15 percent investment from the project.

Burnett believes further delays will be worrying for the UK's energy sector, which is why Chinese cooperation is seen with increasing eagerness.