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Hinkley Point A in Somerset, England | Matt Cardy/Getty Images

National security concerns cast shadow on Hinkley's future

The nuclear project could expose UK's future power grid to Chinese hackers.

By

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Signing off on a nuclear energy project that allows China to build its own reactors on British soil one day may have been too much for Prime Minister Theresa May.

The Hinkley Point C nuclear power plant in southwest England, the most expensive electricity project in the world, was once touted as the answer to the U.K.'s coming energy woes as it retires its fleets of coal-fired and nuclear stations.

After years of delays, it falls on May to give government approval a move she decided to postpone until the fall, soon after the French state-run energy company EDF made its final investment decision on Thursday.

May's concern is believed to be more about the project's Chinese minority shareholder than its \$18 billion price tag, though the previous U.K. government's deal to provide heavy subsidies for the project over 35 years has fuelled widespread opposition to it.

Hinkley is the first of three nuclear projects involving China's state-run China General Nuclear Power Group (CGN). The first two would be built with French technology and some Chinese funding ; the third would become the first Chinese-built-and-operated plant in the West.

Nick Timothy, May's joint chief of staff, warned that the Chinese could build weaknesses into a computer system and shut down the country's energy production at will.

There's no other OECD country that would allow China to have access to its critical infrastructure, said [Paul Dorfman](#), an honorary senior research fellow at the Energy Institute at University College London, describing the successive plants as Russian dolls.

While the collective nuclear deal represents a massive investment, especially in light of Brexit uncertainty, that may not be the only concern.

The treasury is concerned about money, and U.K. intelligence services are concerned about security, Dorfman said. China's hacking expertise would allow access to key data via back-door technology concerning U.K. critical energy infrastructure.

Having spent six years overseeing the U.K.'s intelligence arm MI5 as the home affairs secretary, May has more insight than most into the security threats that give China access to the country's energy system could pose, said [Raffaello Pantucci](#), director of international security studies at the U.K. think tank RUSI. She has a very clear sense of those sorts of concerns.

The U.S. Department of Justice [published an indictment](#) against CGN in April, accusing the company and a Chinese nuclear engineer of trying to enlist U.S.-based experts to develop and produce nuclear material in China, without Washington's approval. CGN would have a 33.5 percent stake in Hinkley if the project proceeds.

Nick Timothy, May's joint chief of staff and loyal advisor, warned last year in a much-discussed blog post that the Chinese could build weaknesses into a computer system and shut down the country's energy production at will. His warning was published just before London and Beijing finalized the nuclear energy partnership with France's EDF.