

Japan appoints head of breakthrough nuclear fusion reactor in France

The politics are being slowly settled ... now perhaps the science can begin!

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A Japanese engineer turned ambassador has been named to head the international project to build a multibillion-dollar experimental nuclear fusion reactor in southern France, a Japanese official said.

Japan's Ambassador to Croatia Kaname Ikeda, a nuclear engineer by training, was named director general of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) organization, slated to be launched in or after 2007.

The decision was made Monday in Vienna at a meeting of high-ranking officials from the project's participating countries, a Japanese official said.

The six ITER partners -- the European Union, the United States, Russia, Japan, South Korea and China -- agreed in June to bring the main facility to Cadarache, southern France, after Japan withdrew its bid to host the 10-billion-euro (12-billion-dollar), 30-year project.

Following years of wrangling between Japan and the EU, Japan was given the 20 percent of staff posts including the director general's job in exchange for dropping its proposal to build the reactor in northern Aomori prefecture.

Ikeda, 59, has been Japan's ambassador to Croatia since 2003 after a career in nuclear science, including heading a Japanese nuclear safety office.

ITER is a pilot project aimed at creating energy that would be cheap, clean, safe and almost infinite.

Instead of splitting the atom -- the principle behind current nuclear plants -- the project seeks to harness nuclear fusion: the power of the sun and the stars.