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## Vietnam aims to build nuclear power plant within 10 years Its ambitions have met with no opposition as many believe Hanoi will comply with UN policy

By Vietnam Correspondent, Roger Mitton

IN HANOI - AS BEFITS its status as a growing force in the region, Vietnam aims to build Asean's first nuclear power plant within the next decade.

Last week, a team of Japanese nuclear power experts visited Hanoi to thrash out details over Vietnam's nuclear programme.

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem said Vietnam was undertaking research to develop the nuclear energy industry for peaceful purposes, which included construction of the country's first nuclear power plant by 2015 and to have it fully operational by 2020.

Recently, [Vietnam Atomic Energy Commission](#) director Vuong Huu Tan told Chinese news agency Xinhua: 'We will have to import all fuel rods and equipment for the first plant's two reactors but will strive to produce them locally for following reactors and plants.'

'Potential foreign suppliers are France, the US, Russia, Japan and Canada.'

Vietnam has a booming economy, a young and dynamic workforce and the second largest population in Asean after Indonesia.

Its burgeoning energy needs make the decision to go nuclear understandable.

But it is also an authoritarian communist-ruled country that has the largest standing army in Asean.

It fought a bloody border war with China less than 30 years ago, and it has unresolved sovereignty issues with five other countries over resource-rich islands in the South China Sea.

However, while the world frets about the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran, Vietnam has quietly embarked on its nuclear scheme with little fanfare and no objections so far.

The reason is partly because many believe that unlike North Korea and Iran, Vietnam will comply with United Nations guidelines enforced by the [International Atomic Energy Authority \(IAEA\)](#).

Said Mr Zachary Abuza, a South-east Asia security expert at Simmons College in the United States: 'Vietnam has good relations with the UN system and has taken its multilateral responsibilities seriously. I believe it will abide by IAEA safeguards and inspections.'

Hanoi plans to locate the first nuclear power station in the central coastal province of Ninh Thuan. Construction is estimated to cost about US\$4 billion (S\$6.3 billion).

Hanoi hopes to get the plant up and running fast because of the growing energy demands of the booming economy and the region's fastest growing population.

Vietnam has extensive off-shore oil reserves which are being developed, but it currently has no refinery capacity. All petrol must be imported, with much of it from Singapore.

So, like many other countries, it is examining other long term sources of energy for its burgeoning economy.

Said Professor Marvin Ott, who teaches national security policy at the [National Defence University](#) in Washington: 'It makes perfect sense that Hanoi would want to develop a civilian nuclear energy capacity.'

Already, Vietnam has built a 500kw experimental reactor at its Dalat Nuclear Research Institute located in the highlands about 200km north-east of Ho Chi Minh City.

Despite entreaties from the Nuclear Suppliers Group led by the United States, Vietnam has resisted moves to ship its high-grade spent fuel from this reactor to Russia in exchange for replacement grade fuel.

Although the Nuclear Suppliers Group has urged Hanoi to agree to IAEA safeguard measures, it has not yet formally signed up to obey these rules.

That stance has caused unease about potential nuclear proliferation, especially given Vietnam's close ties to some of Asia's most repressive regimes and its own authoritarian communist government.

Last week, Vietnam celebrated its national day on Sept 2, and although countries from around the world sent salutations, Vietnam's media only highlighted the well-wishes from China, North Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Cuba and Myanmar.

Iran also has close ties to Vietnam, and, like North Korea, it is known for flouting nuclear proliferation rules and having the potential to develop nuclear weapons.

There is concern that Vietnam could go down the same path as Pyongyang and Teheran, especially if it felt threatened by its traditional enemy China.

Said Prof Ott: 'If I were a Vietnamese defence strategist, I would see a nuclear weapons capability as potentially useful, primarily to prevent bullying by China.'

Of course, any move by Vietnam to use its nuclear power industry to develop nuclear weapons would contravene Asean's strict rules about keeping South-east Asia nuclear-free.

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