

—
Iran's Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant to Launch Operations with Russian Help

Ken Koyama, PhD
Director
Strategy and Industry Research Unit
Institute of Energy Economics, Japan

On August 13, Russian state-run nuclear company Rosatom issued a statement that Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant (with capacity at 1 million kW) under construction with Rosatom's help would be prepared to launch operations as nuclear fuel is transported to the plant on August 21. A ceremony to mark this event will be held on that day in the presence of Rosatom President Sergey Kirienko and Ali Akbar Salehi, president of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran.

Before the nuclear plant launches actual operations, Iran will have to take some more steps including the loading of fuel in the nuclear reactor under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency and operations through stable nuclear fission control. The loading is reportedly scheduled to start in late September. As nuclear fuel is transported to the plant, however, it will officially become a nuclear facility, making a key step toward its operations.

The construction and operations of a nuclear power station have been Iran's national project amounting to its long-cherished wish. The project goes back to the Shah Era in the 1970s before the Islamic Revolution. The construction began with help from Germany's Siemens. But the project came to a halt on the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After such regional developments as the Iran-Iraq War, Russia participated in construction to resume the project in the 1990s. However, Iran's nuclear weapon development problem surfaced separately from the civilian nuclear power station project. As Iran's tensions with the United States have escalated over the problem, the United States and the United Nations have imposed sanctions on Iran. The situation surrounding Iran's nuclear weapon development problem has basically remained tough. Under such situation, the Bushehr nuclear plant project has been delayed. At last, the project is making progress, preparing to launch plant operations.

Over the past one or two years, the international situation surrounding Iran's nuclear weapon development problem has grown even tougher. Calls grew for tough actions against Iran that proceeded with its nuclear weapon development (uranium enrichment) even under international pressures led by the United States. As a result, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1929 in June this year, urging Iran to promptly stop uranium enrichment under threats of tougher financial sanctions, arms embargoes and cargo inspections. In response to the U.N. sanctions, the United States and European countries came up with additional and enhanced sanctions on Iran.

What has been behind the progress seen toward the operations of the Bushehr nuclear power station even under such situation? In an interesting development, the United States, which had a tough stance against the nuclear plant project in connection with the nuclear weapon development issue, sent messages that could be interpreted as tolerating the nuclear plant project. For example, Assistant Secretary of State Phillip Crowley indicated some understanding about Iran's operations of the Bushehr nuclear plant with Russian help by pointing out that it was important that the construction and operations of the nuclear plant be put under IAEA supervision. He is believed to have made a fine-tuned decision to demonstrate some understanding about the nuclear plant construction in a bid to get the UNSC resolution adopted with support from Russia that had been negative about sanctions on Iran. Given that Russia has adopted a nuclear fuel leasing scheme to provide fuel for the Bushehr nuclear plant and to collect spent fuel for transportation out of Iran, as noted by White House Spokesman Robert Gibbs, the United States could argue that if the construction and operations of the nuclear plant are designed only for peaceful purposes as claimed by the Iranians, Iran may not have to build any uranium enriching facility on its own. The U.S. government could have taken such argument into account. Meanwhile, Russia might have thought it would be important for Moscow to enhance its presence in nuclear business while securing its influences on Iran and the United States in international politics.

Under such situation, a simple conclusion is that while the construction and operations of the nuclear plant might have been approved internationally amid various speculations, the nuclear weapon development problem has existed as a separate issue. Future developments regarding the nuclear weapon development problem may be tough. In this sense, no optimism can be warranted on future developments including how the international situation regarding the nuclear weapon development problem will change and how such change will be linked with the nuclear power plant.

Nuclear energy has attracted global attention again in respect to global warming, the enhancement of energy security, growth strategies and industries policies. At a time when the term "nuclear renaissance" is frequently used, expectations have grown more and more on nuclear power generation as an energy option. As indicated by the Iranian case, however, a key point that we should not forget is that international efforts, frameworks and cooperation for the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, in addition to the secured safety, economic efficiency and social acceptability of nuclear energy, are important for the future expansion of nuclear power generation.

More directly, the Iranian nuclear weapon development problem is an important regional issue for the Middle East including Iran and of great significance to the political and geopolitical stability of the Middle East from a broader viewpoint. At a time when international tensions exist over the Iranian nuclear weapon development problem, there are many points to which we should pay attention depending on future developments. One of these points is how the international situation involving Iran and the toughened sanctions on Iran could change regional political tensions (a possible tougher Israeli attitude is predicted by some experts). The other points include how any change in regional political tensions would affect the stability of the international energy situation and how the progress in Iran's introduction of nuclear power generation would impact efforts that have begun in the Middle East to introduce nuclear power generation.

Iran's nuclear power generation project is closely related to the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons as a key global challenge and indicates how closely the nuclear power generation development is linked to international political and geopolitical issues. Now that nuclear power generation projects have increased in emerging and new nuclear power generation countries in Asia and the Middle East, Iranian developments are important for anticipating future international energy situations.

Contact: report@tky.ieej.or.jp