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FROM CONTRIBUTING TO PEACEFUL FUTURE OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA TO EXPANDING ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH CEE: THE SOUTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ENERGY BOOM AS AN OPPORTUNITY

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In the past few years, Republic of Korea (ROK) has been experiencing a surge in both economic and political support of the field of nuclear energy, which resulted into its boom and the launching of a number of projects both domestically and also as an investment opportunity abroad. Such a powerful source of energy will contribute to finally reaching ROK's energy independence in the future. At the same time, it is also an instrument, which can be used in its politics when dealing with North Korea (DPRK), and even during potential future reunification of the peninsula. What started as a quest to make South Korea finally energy-independent in its geopolitical situation of the necessity of most of its electricity being imported, turned also into an economic opportunity for the industry to expand abroad via participation in foreign nuclear energy enterprises. Now it seems that one of the most important South Korean projects will be the completion of the Dukovany Nuclear Plant in the Czech Republic. Thus, the boom of the Korean nuclear energy sector and its successes abroad can lead to strengthening of economic/cultural relations with Prague and possibly with the entire CEE region, through the plethora of other areas of cooperation that the main project will bring with it.[1]

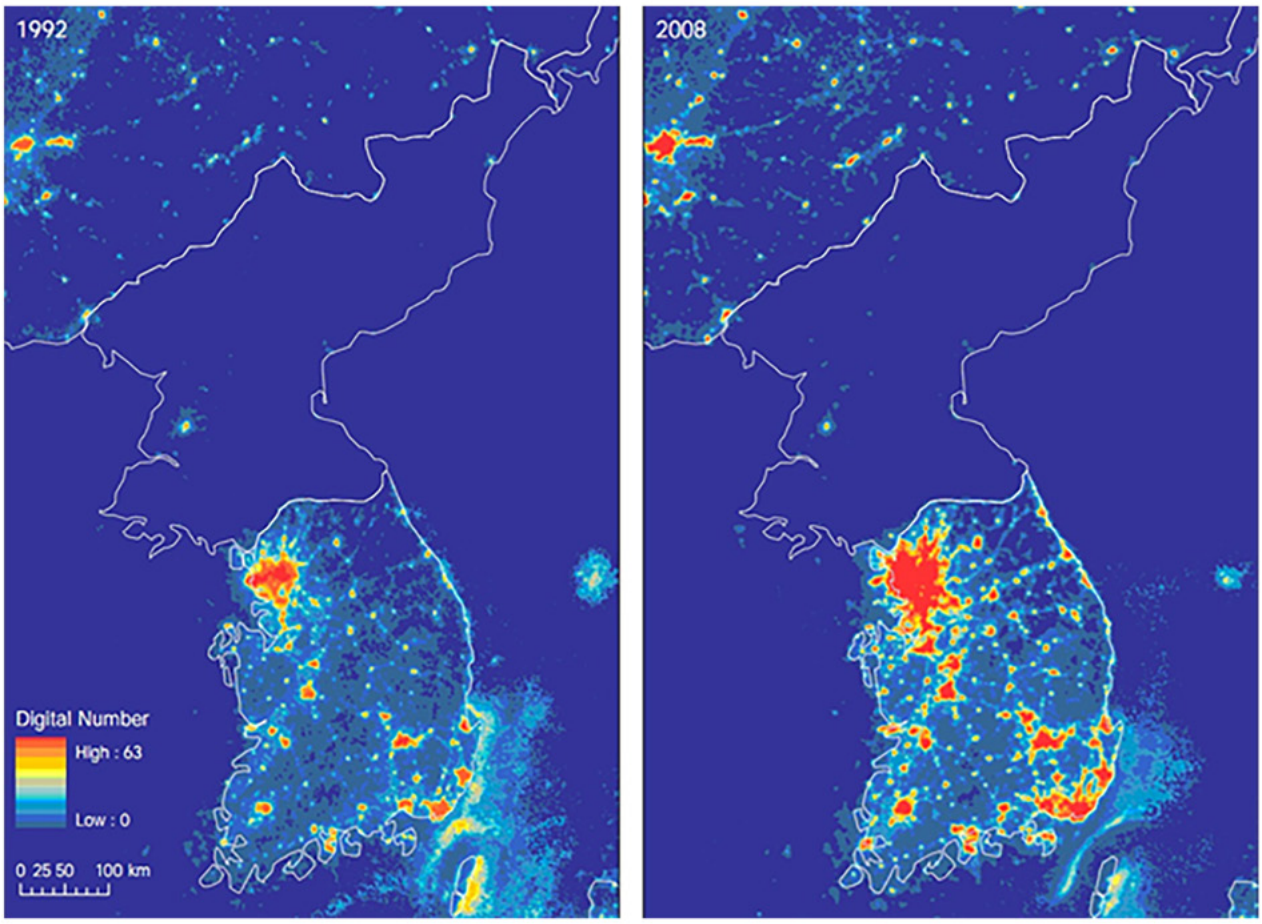
1. "Ministr Vlček Jednal v Praze S Firmou KHNP a Team Korea O Dostavbě Dukovan, Český Průmysl Ocenil Jeho Podporu." MPO. Accessed March 21, 2025. https://mpo.gov.cz/cz/rozcestnik/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/ministr-vlcek-jednal-v-praze-s-firmou-khnp-a-team-korea-o-dostavbe-dukovan--cesky-prumysl-ocenil-jeho-podporu--286335/.

South Korean energy sector in relation to the issue of North Korea and Korean Reunification

The future potential reunification of the two Korean states would be an unprecedented event with far-reaching consequences. Given the immense differences in politics, economics, and infrastructure between South Korea and North Korea, both challenges and opportunities of such a step would be enormous. A unified Korea could, according to experts, even become one of the strongest world economies. Combining the highly advanced economy of ROK with the cheap young labor and mineral resources of DPRK, could lead to very successful results. On the other hand, the challenges and pitfalls would be very numerous. Apart from political and economic ones, there would also be a need to connect the vastly different technological and infrastructure systems, while simultaneously trying to avoid chaos and humanitarian crises and keep the basic services in the north working. One of the less mentioned dimensions of these predictions is regarding the realm of energy and electricity. The two countries' energy systems developed in

COMPARISON GROWTH IN ELECTRICITY COVERAGE AT NIGHT BETWEEN THE TWO KOREAS.

(SOURCE - ELECTRICITY « NORTH KOREAN ECONOMY WATCH)



unique circumstances. In fact, popular satellite images of the contrast of light and darkness in the nighttime between ROK and DPRK became tacitly one of the symbols of sharply divided Korea.[2]

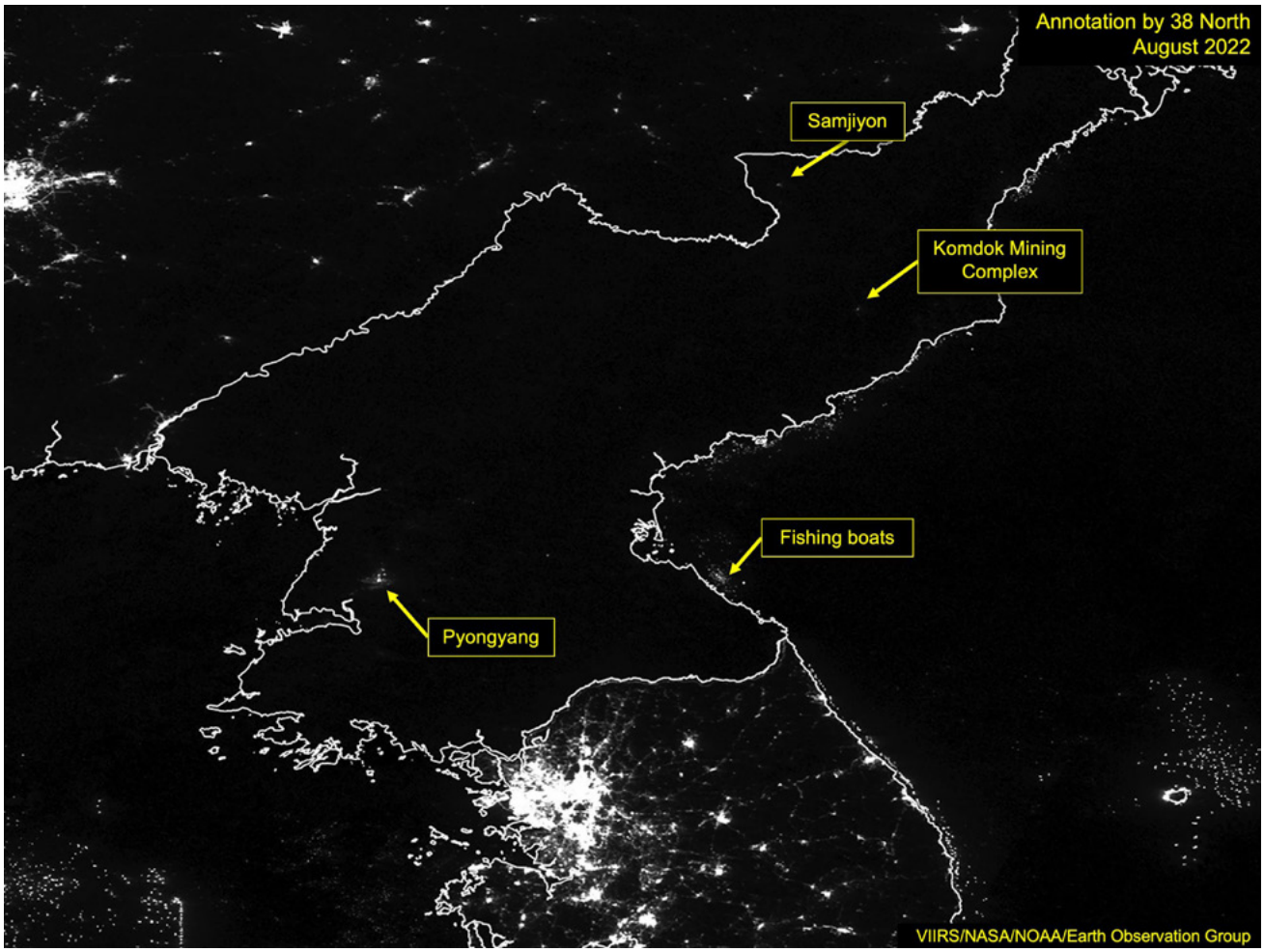
North Korean electricity grid is aging badly since the fall of the Soviet Union, which provided most of its energy infrastructure. Combined with the lack of utilized energy sources, the population experiences shortages and blackouts on regular bases. Therefore, electricity is one of the main areas where ROK would need quickly react and saturate DPRK in case of its regime's instability or even fall. According to the experts, large-scale population movements are likely to happen in possible Korean reunification scenarios, built on evidence-based analysis of the German reunification to predict changes in future temporal and spatial electricity demand. Such a large-scale population movement would certainly modify patterns of electrical power demand in South Korea. There already were cases of Seoul's aid to Pyongyang in the form of electricity transfer in the past, but this would be a completely new level and extent.[3]

Already in 2005, ROK power transmission lines between the two countries were built in order to supply electricity for the industrial complex in North Korean Gaeseong, where South Korean firms operate. These lines would play a big role if Seoul expands its supply of electricity to all regions in North Korea.[4] The Ministry of Unification of ROK at that time stated that the power supply can be understood as part of the effort to lay infrastructure in the north for preparation of a reunification. These lines were consequently cut by the DPRK during a period of increased tension with their neighbour, yet they are still standing and easily fixable and can be used for the same purposes again.[5]

In the 2000s, former South Korean Unification Ministers had also been proposing providing 2 million kilowatts of electricity to North Korea on the condition that Pyongyang dismantles its military nuclear program, using it as a tool for negotiating. This did not materialize but it shows the plans and thinking about this among ROK's elites and predictions of their experts.[6]

With DPRK both as a neighbor and a foe, there are two main scenarios when South Korea could be forced by circumstances to supply electricity to the north in large amounts and, therefore, take advantage of its expanding and gradually diversifying energy sector. First, when the situation in North Korea will require such measures in order to prevent humanitarian catastrophe due to extreme unprecedented electricity shortages, even though the regime itself will not fall. It seems rational, that with such an unpredictable neighbor with population deprived of basic needs and experiencing electricity blackouts on regular bases, South Korea should be prepared also for an event of extreme shortage situation that could transform into great humanitarian crisis, and the more nuclear units and energy independence of ROK, the greater help in the form of direct electricity transmission to the north can be provided. In this scenario, such measure would be rather

2. Cheong, Inkyo. "Estimation of Benefits and costs of Korea's unification: A critical Review." Journal of International Logistics and Trade 13.1 (2015): 31-47.
3. Pheiffer, Hang S. "The Social Implications of Korean Reunification: Population Migration, Social Integration, and Discrimination." PhD diss., Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School, 2019.
4. "Inter-Korean power lines reconnected." KBS World. Accessed March 21, 2025. https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=northkorea&id=&board_seq=147086&page=97&board_code=
5. "DPRK: Electricity aid to be turning point for inter-Korean Economic Community - Democratic People's Republic of Korea." ReliefWeb. Accessed March 21, 2025. https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-peoples-republic-korea/dprk-electricity-aid-be-turning-point-inter-korean-economic
6. "Inter-Korean power lines reconnected." KBS World. Accessed March 21, 2025. https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=northkorea&id=&board_seq=147086&page=97&board_code=



KOREAN PENINSULA AT NIGHT: CONTRAST IN ENERGY CONSUMPTION BETWEEN THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

(SOURCE - FIG2-NIGHTLIGHTS-23-0403-SCALED.JPG (2560×1920))

short-term.[7]

Second scenario is the case of reunification of both Koreas. Then, the issue of energy and electricity would gain even higher importance. Most likely development is the fall of Pyongyang's regime and consequent chaos, which would immediately cause a crisis and mass population movement with Seoul trying to manage it. In that case, Seoul will likely have to provide energy for both Korean states simultaneously and for an unknown period of time.[8]

Therefore, it is very important how advanced and in what state the energy field in South Korea is, since it will have to handle such a situation sooner or later. [9] The uniqueness of the situation of South Korea regarding its energy dependency lies in the fact that it is in practice economically functioning as an island country, due to separation from the rest of Eurasia by the territory of isolated North Korea. Therefore, it faces the challenges of how to reach its own energy independence in this strategic area, and on top of that how to at some point handle supplying the DPRK as well. Therefore, the possibility that in such a

7. Forster, Alex S. "Electrifying North Korea: Bringing Power to Underserved Marginal Populations in the DPRK," East-West Center Working Papers, no. 69 (April 2014): 1-24.
8. Lankov, Andrei. The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
9. Young,B. "When the Lights Went Out: Electricity in North Korea and Dependency on Moscow" (International Journal of Korean Unification Studies Vol. 29, No. 1, 2020, 107-134) of Korean Unification Studies Vol. 29, No. 1, 2020, 107-134)

moment Seoul would have to import energy sources not only for itself but also for the entire DPRK, appears dreadful. These are the geopolitical realities South Korea is existing within, thus all its strategic infrastructure including energy and electricity should attempt to be as prepared as possible. If the policies of decreasing energy dependency through nuclear and renewable sources are successfully implemented, future DPRK's humanitarian difficulties could be eased. Furthermore, this will help to lay the basis for economic unification between the two Koreas.[10] Therefore, it is very strategically important what the exact state of ROK's energy sector currently is.

State of nuclear energy in South Korea

South Korean leadership have always been dealing with the long-term challenge of energy security. It is a concern that almost all countries in the world have, yet it is an extremely threatening matter for ROK. Given its geographic location, South Korea is profoundly dependent on foreign sources to import the energy it needs to keep its highly advanced and bustling economy going.[11]

This was the reason why Seoul started developing the peaceful use of nuclear energy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The first nuclear power unit began to be built at the Kori power plant in the early 1970s. It was a pressurized water reactor made by the American company Westinghouse. It was completed and put into commercial operation in 1978. The quest for self-sufficiency and the reduction of imports of energy raw materials led to the rapid development of this sector. Thus, by the early 1980s, seven additional units were under construction and being quickly completed. Based on the experience gained, South Korea began work on its own reactor model soon afterwards. Over the past 40 years, ROK has become a leading country in the field of nuclear technology. Most importantly, it was able to create a robust, homegrown nuclear energy R&D program. At the same time, Seoul has had a good track record of operating nuclear plants without any accidents.[12] [13]

Despite these successes, the share of nuclear energy and renewable energy sources of the entire energy mix remained surprisingly low in South Korea until recently. The nuclear industry developed well, yet it was still less significant than fossil fuels. As also mentioned, both coal, natural gas, and electricity have to be imported from overseas. Moreover, the inland area is quite mountainous. There is thus a very high density of inhabited areas. The number of sites suitable

10. Kim, Philseo, So-Bin Cho, and Man-Sung Yim. "Examination of excess electricity generation patterns in South Korea under the renewable initiative for 2030." Nuclear Engineering and Technology 54.8 (2022): 2883-2897.

11. Kim, Jongin, et al. "Operational flexibility nuclear generation in South Korea: A comprehensive impact analysis." Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews 208 (2025): 115055.

12. Choi, Sungyeol, et al. "Fourteen lessons learned from the successful nuclear power program of the Republic of Korea." Energy policy 37.12 (2009): 5494-5508.

13. Platte, J. AD-22 USAF AETC AWC/CSDS. "South Korea's Evolving Quest for Energy Security: Away from Fossil Fuels and Back to Nucle." Air University (AU). Accessed March 21, 2025. https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3212609/south-koreas-evolving-quest-for-energy-security-away-from-fossil-fuels-and-back/.

for the location of renewable energy sources is therefore very limited. Particularly as part of the coastline drops very quickly in depth and is not suitable for offshore wind farms. This is also why still in 2017, a full 43.2% of electricity was generated from coal, 20.8% from gas, and almost 3% from fuel oil. Fossil sources thus generated almost 67% of electricity. Nuclear then supplied "only" 27.5% of the electricity, and renewables around 6%. If South Korea is to make a real attempt at reducing its dependence on fossil sources, it is hard to imagine that it can do so without developing its nuclear power sector even further.[14] [15]

Therefore, at least since the early 2010s, we can observe a great effort to undertake the transition of Seoul's energy security strategy, in order to finally shift away from non-renewable energy sources and increase South Korean independence in this field. At the same time, it is also an important step in order to move ROK closer to an environmentally friendly and more sustainable economy. After years of hesitating, it appears that the full change is happening now at last. Korean official plans for 2015-2029 call for the launch of thirteen new nuclear reactors. (Republic of Korea currently operates 24 nuclear units, most of which are pressurized water reactors.)[16]

The long-term plans regarding nuclear energy had been temporarily hindered by the turns in ROK's politics. First, President Moon, elected in 2017, took steps to partially stop the shift toward this type of energy, but his successor Yoon Suk-yeol has strongly accelerated the original direction again. The ROK's government under his leadership unveiled a new energy policy in summer of 2022, its target is to have nuclear plants' share of the entire energy mix at least at 30% by the end of this decade. It also aims to export 10 nuclear plants abroad till 2030. Second, president Yoon himself was recently impeached for his role in declaring martial law in December 2024. That raised some concerns because the opposition was not as clearly pro-nuclear energy as the president had been. Nevertheless, the new acting administration eventually confirmed that the plans will remain in effect. A strong confirmation of it is the fact that ROK's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy later publicly stated that it will release KRW 150 billion (i.e. USD 103 million) of financial resources for the year 2025 to companies from the domestic nuclear industry. That represents a raise of KRW 50 billion from last year.[17]

Therefore, despite the recent political upheavals and rather slow policy change until the past few years, the future of South Korean nuclear industry looks bright. ROK is about to expand its nuclear plants' share of the entire energy mix at the expense of fossil fuels, while it also succeeds to export its nuclear technology to an increasing number of foreign countries, including those in CEE.[18]

14. Kim, Jongin, et al. "Operational flexibility nuclear generation in South Korea: A comprehensive impact analysis." Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews 208 (2025): 115055.
15. Wagner, Vladimir. "Korejský Jaderný Program - Historie, Současnost A Potenciál Pro Čr." oEnergetice.cz, May 6, 2019. https://oenergetice.cz/nazory/korejsky-jaderny-program-historie-soucasnost-potencial-cr.
16. Kim, Philseo, et al. "Challenges in nuclear energy adoption: Why nuclear energy newcomer countries put nuclear power programs on hold?." Nuclear Engineering and Technology 56.4 (2024): 1234-1243.
17. Kim, Ryeon-Woo, et al. "Political polarization and the energy policy paradox: assessing the impact of South Korea's nuclear power phase-out policy." Environmental Politics (2024): 1-24.
18. Kim, Philseo, et al. "Challenges in nuclear energy adoption: Why nuclear energy newcomer countries put nuclear power programs on hold?." Nuclear Engineering and Technology 56.4 (2024): 1234-1243.

ROK's breakthrough nuclear project in Europe

In the South-central Czech Republic close to the village of Dukovany stands the oldest operating nuclear power plant in the Czech Republic - the Dukovany Nuclear Power Plant. The first unit of the Dukovany plant was put into operation in 1985 and the last one in 1987. It is an important source of the Czech power system and the second most powerful one in terms of output. Enriched uranium dioxide, which is used as a fuel there, can replace 12 million tons of lignite per year. Nevertheless, the facility is aging. Since the late 2010s, there had been a public debate about the need to finish the plant, i.e. to enlarge it with another two units. A public tender was launched in March 2022 and it represents the largest contract in the modern history of the Czech Republic.[19]

Since the very beginning, the South Korean company KHNP (Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power), a subsidiary of majority state-owned Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO), was one of the main contenders, eagerly pursuing this project, since it matched ROK's increasing ambitions in the area of nuclear energy facilities. The Dukovany plant now operates four reactor units, each with a capacity of 510 MW. They are to be replaced by two new units, each with a capacity of 1 150 MW. While today the Czechs get about 30 percent of their electricity from nuclear source, by 2050 it will be half. And the other half will come from renewable sources. By comparison, one new Dukovany unit is expected to produce about seven percent of the electricity consumed in the Czech Republic in 2050, and South Korean energy companies want to be part of it. Since it is a project, that would open the door to the EU for them for the first time.[20]

For security reasons, Russian suppliers were excluded from the public tender already at the outset. Ultimately in 2024, the government in Prague decided that the two units will be built by KHNP which, according to Czech officials, submitted a more favorable bid than the second finalist in the competition, being the French company EdF. (The third competitor, the American firm Westinghouse, was eliminated earlier.) The construction of one unit will cost approximately up to CZK 400 billion in total.[21]

The big advantage of KHNP is that the South Koreans already own a Czech company based in Pilsen, the Škoda Doosan Power, therefore the turbine of the reactor and its hall can be manufactured directly in the country. In addition, KHNP is promising 20 % to 60 % participation

19. Matejovic, Peter, et al. "Backfitting of Dukovany NPP for design extension conditions." Nuclear Engineering and Design 407 (2023): 112311.

20. "Odvolání Prezidenta Neovlivní Tendr Na Dukovany, Uvedlo Ministerstvo Průmyslu." oEnergetice.cz, December 14, 2024. https://oenergetice.cz/jaderne-elektrarny/odvolani-prezidenta-neovlivni-tendr-na-dukovany-uvedlo-ministerstvo-prumyslu.

21. "Pro Dukovany Chceme od Korejců Strategickou Spolupráci s Českými Firmami, Zdůrazňuje Energetik." iROZHLAS. Accessed February 2, 2025. https://www.irozhlas.cz/ekonomika/pro-dukovany-chceme-od-korejcu-strategickou-spolupraci-s-ceskymi-firmami_2503140704_elev.

DUKOVANY POWER PLANT (SOURCE - CEZ GROUP NPP DUKOVANY | CEZ GROUP)

(the exact figure is still under negotiation)[22] of Czech suppliers in the construction of the new nuclear units at Dukovany, which would significantly boost Czech industry. Czech companies should achieve this share by 2039, when the two reactors under construction should be completed. KHNP has identified 200 Czech companies with which it could cooperate in the construction and has concluded 76 Memoranda of Understanding.[23]

The CEZ Group (Czech state's national energy provider corporation), which is in charge of the tender, is currently negotiating the final contract for the project with KHNP, which is expected to be signed during April 2025. In addition, part of the negotiations is also the potential construction of up to two more new units at Temelín Power Plant (the other Czech nuclear plant) by the same company, that could start in the next five years.[24]

Part of this deal is also the goal to strengthen trade and cultural relations between the Czech Republic and Republic of Korea in general. Seoul and Prague want their cooperation to go beyond nuclear energy to also include research, development, small modular reactors, hydrogen technology, electromobility, battery systems, semiconductors, and education. At the end of 2024, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade announced, among other things, that it had also concluded

22. In past days, there are emerging worries in Czech industry community due to 1) reports that KHNP could eventually be unable to fulfil the promise of 60% participation on the project by Czech companies, and due to 2) mentions that the Korean company could maybe withdraw from other preliminarily settled projects in Western Europe. Yet, at the time of writing of this article (end of March 2025), no such information was officially confirmed.

23. "Otevíráme Koreji Dveře Do Světa, Hlásí Čeští Průmyslníci. A Chtějí Zakázky." iDNES.cz, September 20, 2024. https://www.idnes.cz/ekonomika/domaci/korea-khnp-dukovany-tendr-ceske-firmy-prumysl.A240920_130127_ekonomika_ven.

24. "Historie a Současnost." Skupina ČEZ - O Společnosti. Accessed February 2, 2025. https://www.cez.cz/cs/o-cez/vyrobni-zdroje/jaderna-energetika/jaderna-energetika-v-ceske-republice/edu/historie-a-soucasnost

a memorandum of cooperation on the development of the semiconductor ecosystem with South Korea, which is one of the technological giants in the semiconductor industry. According to the ministry, the agreement is intended to actively promote the development of the semiconductor sector with an emphasis on strengthening the supply chain in Czechia and Korea, as well as joint industrial research and development. KHNP is also considering setting up a fund to support medium and small companies in the Czech Republic to obtain the necessary certifications to participate in the Dukovany project.[25]

According to the Czech Confederation of Industry and Transport, other strategic partnerships should soon be defined, including, for example, the construction of a gigafactory and possibly a high-speed railway on Czech territory. The statements of the Czech ministers and the debate around the construction of a new gigafactory in the Moravian-Silesian region (north-east Czech Republic) show that expectations are high. Several ministers confirmed that at least two major Korean brands are in play, namely Samsung and LG, whose representatives were also part of the delegation that arrived in the Czech Republic in September 2024. These plans include the expansion of existing joint endeavors as well. Hyundai, for example, has been making a significant contribution to the Czech economy for a long time, and has brought significant economic transformation to the Moravian-Silesian region, but the company could still open up its supply chain more, which could realistically happen with a greater economic connectivity coming.[26]

All of this additional economic and technological cooperation is thus connected to the project of the Dukovany plant. It would itself intertwine Czech and South Korean security and economic interests for decades to come, and it would bring Korean firms' ability to a new level in the sphere of nuclear energy globally. Proving, that currently they are able to build nuclear units also outside Asia,[27] and for the first time in the EU. At the same time, the Czech Republic is just the first of multiple countries where South Koreans plan to build or modernize nuclear power plants in the near future, including some other projects in Europe and the CEE region. For instance, KHNP will also prolong the lifespan of a reactor in Romania, and probably will take part in building two plant units in Patnów-Konin, Poland. Still, this development is a direct consequence of the great boom and support of the nuclear energy field that has been taking place in ROK itself.[28]

In summary, the boom of South Korean nuclear energy is promising to have a number of long-term positive effects. It could contribute to increased energy independence of ROK and enable coping with potential future crises on the peninsula, as well as with the unification itself. Additionally, it is becoming an opportunity for ROK's economy to expand abroad and deepen economic/cultural relations abroad, especially in the CEE.

25. "Dodržíme Šedesátiprocentní Účast Českých Firem V Dukovanech, Slibuje KHNP." iDNES.cz, February 25, 2025. https://www.idnes.cz/ekonomika/domaci/khnp-cez-je-dukovany-jizni-korea-elektrarna-dostavba.A250225_152201_ekonomika_hyk.

26. "Nejisté Dukovany II. Podpis Smlouvy S Korejci Ohrožují Konkurenti I Pád Prezidenta Juna." Ekonomický deník, December 14, 2024. https://ekonomickydenik.cz/nejiste-dukovany-ii-podpis-smlouvy-s-korejci-kazi-konkurenti-i-pad-prezidenta-juna/.

27. KHNP has already built four larger units in the UAE. The company met all deadlines and kept the original prices from the contract.

28. Krýžová, Sofie. "Korejci Postaví V Česku Dva Jaderné Bloky, Rozhodla Vláda." Seznam Zprávy, July 17, 2024. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ekonomika-firmy-sledujte-vlada-rozhoduje-kdo-bude-stavet-ceske-jadro-255941.

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