



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 23, 2023

French Government to Reboot Ambitious Nuclear Policy to Tackle Energy Crisis

SINGAPORE — In light of the immensity and gravity of the energy crisis in Europe, the French government indicated its plans a few months ago to drastically amend its stance on nuclear power.

After having lobbied for the use of renewable energies instead of nuclear power to address the nation's energy demands, France has now been forced by circumstances to urgently relaunch an ambitious nuclear investment policy. The mandate to close power stations, initiated during President Emmanuel Macron's previous five-year term, is no longer relevant.



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A bill has been undergoing evaluation in the French Senate since Jan. 17 to permit the construction of new nuclear reactors. The text, defended by Minister of Energy Transition Agnès Pannier-Runacher, is technical, with the aim of deterring the deceleration of future construction sites as a result of administrative procedures or litigation.

The text is also a result of Macron's February 2022 Belfort speech (prior to the Russia-Ukraine crisis), in which he declared the necessity for France to revert to an "ambitious and sustainable" nuclear policy. And in a televised address in November 2021, he stated, "To guarantee France's energy independence and achieve our objectives, in particular carbon neutrality in 2050, we will for the first time in decades relaunch the construction of nuclear reactors in our country."

This nuclear acceleration bill complements another bill on renewable energy that the National Assembly authorized in early January. Notably, all French political parties, except the "green" climate ecologists and alarmists, have given their unanimous support for the move to fortify French nuclear power.

Nonetheless, debates in the political arena regarding the nuclear issue will likely prove to be heated, with critics of the policy leveraging on the opportunity to lambaste the flip-flopping of Macron and his volte-face on this key issue.

After all, Macron was elected in 2017 partly because of his pledge to decrease the share of nuclear power in the energy mix to 50 percent — the deadline having been postponed in 2018 from 2025 to 2035.

The Fessenheim nuclear power plant in northeast France was closed in 2020 during Macron's first term as president. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne praised this closure — before supporting the restart of nuclear power. Hitherto closed-down reactors have been rebooted one at a time due to the urgency of the energy crisis, and the government plans to reboot 45 reactors out of 56 by mid-January this year.

The text being examined in the Senate is merely preliminary, until the multi-annual energy program to



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establish new electricity production targets has been voted on and finalized in the summer. The new program will stand as a contrast to the one that was voted on in 2019, which barred any new reactor construction and prevented the closure of twelve more (apart from Fessenheim).

Overall, public opinion in France seems to support the country's about-face in its nuclear policy. Based on a recent Odoxa survey for *Le Figaro*, 60 percent of French people regard nuclear power in a positive light, as compared with 51 percent in 2021 and only 34 percent in 2019. The crisis in Ukraine and the lack of resources appear to have contributed to this shift in attitude.

Yet some analysts contend that the change in nuclear policy is a tad late since the industry is in serious crisis. Poorly maintained and neglected fleets as well as decreased production have contributed to worries of power cuts at the peak of winter. Several years of disengagement of the French state with its energy infrastructure have resulted in a loss of competence and know-how. As former EDF (a French utility company) CEO Jean-Bernard Lévy declared, "it is not possible to be competent and efficient when you build a reactor every fifteen years."

Indeed, one cannot underestimate the necessity of unveiling a large-scale, ambitious plan for building numerous reactors to achieve a critical mass that will permit standardized work, reduced costs, and enhanced performance.

According to *Le Figaro*, it would be necessary to hire and train at least 10,000 workers, such as technicians and engineers, yearly until 2030 to implement the new campaign. To complicate matters further, EDF will face challenges in absorbing all these costs due to ailing finances. As a consequence of the previous closures and problems with maintenance, EDF produced only 65 percent of its usual electricity output in 2022 — a shortfall of €65 billion.

Because of the length of time required to construct new plants, the country must still concentrate on renewable energy in the short term.

Amid his long-term roadmap to "re-industrialize" the country, dubbed "[France 2030](#)," Macron is poised to discuss the development of wind turbines. He also indicated his plans for France to become a leader in green hydrogen by 2030, declaring "massive investments" for industrial decarbonization through both nuclear power and renewable energy.

"Our country is going to re-industrialize itself through technological start-ups and what is called 'deep tech,'" said Macron. "And our large industrial groups will survive, transform and win the game thanks to the disruptive innovation of startups that they will have incubated or that they will have bought or with which they will have partnerships."

Alluding to France's commitment to hydrogen, Macron added that the possibility of using clean electricity from France's fleet of 56 nuclear reactors is "a huge change" that "will allow us to be a leader" in the emerging hydrogen sector and that hydrogen could be a substitute for liquid fuels for road transport. In the hydrogen sector, "We have very good research, we have very good players: Air Liquide and a few other manufacturers. In addition, we have a network of start-ups, equipment manufacturers, entrepreneurs, innovators who are ready to go and who are organized."



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