

# Putin hails Türkiye ties as first Turkish nuclear plant inaugurated

Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed Moscow's burgeoning energy and wider economic ties with Ankara on Thursday as he and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan took part virtually in a ceremony inaugurating Türkiye's first nuclear power plant.

Russia's state nuclear energy company Rosatom built the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and Thursday's ceremony saw the first loading of nuclear fuel into the first power unit at the site in Türkiye's southern Mersin Province, Reuters reported.

"This is a flagship project," Putin said via video link. "It brings both mutual economic benefits and, of course, helps to strengthen the multi-faceted partnership between our two states."

Putin described Akkuyu as "the largest nuclear construction project in the world" and noted that it would mean Tür-

kiye having to import less Russian natural gas in the future.

"But Türkiye will enjoy the advantage of a country that has its own nuclear energy, and nuclear energy, as you know, is one of the cheapest," he added.

Erdogan thanked Putin for his support on Akkuyu, adding: "We will take steps to build a second and a third nuclear power plant in Türkiye as soon as possible."

In a phone call before the ceremony at Akkuyu, Erdogan and Putin also discussed the situation in Ukraine and the Black Sea grain deal, the Turkish leader's office said. Putin, keen to build new markets for Russian hydrocarbons outside Europe, traditionally Moscow's main customer, reiterated his call for Türkiye to become a regional gas hub "to supply natural gas to interested foreign buyers at market prices".



The \$20b, 4,800 megawatt (MW) project at Akkuyu entails the construction of four reactors that will allow Türkiye to join the small club of nations with civil nuclear energy. "We plan to complete the physical launch (of the plant) next year... in order to be able to produce electricity on a steady basis from 2025, as we agreed," Andrei

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan attend a ceremony for nuclear fuel loading at the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, which is under construction in Turkey, via video link in Moscow, Russia, on April 27, 2023.

● REUTERS

Likhachev, head of Rosatom, said in Mersin before the ceremony. Erdogan also joined Thursday's ceremony by videolink rather than travelling there due to poor health that forced him to cancel campaign



rallies this week. Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said Erdogan was feeling better on Thursday. Türkiye faces landmark presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

**Italy's PM wins parliamentary backing for extra borrowing**



REUTERS - Italy's government on Friday won parliamentary backing for additional borrowing, after a first attempt resulted in a major setback for Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

The government's request to marginally raise this year's budget deficit to 4.5% of gross domestic product from 4.4% under current trends was eventually approved by parliament following a surprising defeat on Thursday.

**Three Pakistani soldiers, seven militants, killed in clashes**

AFP - Three Pakistani soldiers and seven militants were killed in multiple clashes in the country's restive northwest, the military said on Friday. The clashes occurred in the Lakki Marwat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which shares a border with Afghanistan.

**UAE astronaut exits ISS for first Arab space walk**



AFP - Emirati astronaut Sultan Alneyadi stepped out of the International Space Station (ISS) Friday for the first space walk by an Arab astronaut, a moment touted by the UAE as a "milestone".

**UN expert urges Japan to sanction Myanmar junta**

AFP - Japan should sanction Myanmar as it has done for Russia over its Ukraine war, a UN expert said Friday, slamming the junta's "barbarism and oppression." Thomas Andrews, the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, also urged Japan to immediately end a training program for Myanmar troops, warning it was tarnishing the image of the country's military.

## China slams UN experts' 'unfounded' concerns over Tibet forced labour

China accused a panel of UN experts of making unfounded claims Friday after they accused Beijing of forcing hundreds of thousands of Tibetans into programmes that threaten their cultural identity and could lead to forced labour. The panel of six UN special rapporteurs voiced concern in a statement on Thursday that the vocational training and labour transfer programmes in China were being used as a pretext to undermine Tibetan religious, linguistic

and cultural identity, and to monitor and indoctrinate Tibetans, AFP reported. Beijing hit back, insisting the Tibet region "enjoys social stability, economic development, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and people live and work in peace".

"The alleged concerns of the special mechanism experts are completely unfounded," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said.

"We urge these experts to respect the basic facts,"

she said, warning the rapporteurs not to "become a tool or accomplice of some anti-China forces".

Thursday's statement was signed by the special rapporteurs on contemporary slavery, people trafficking, contemporary racism, cultural rights, minority issues and the right to development.

"Hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have reportedly been 'transferred' from their traditional rural lives to low-skilled and low-paid employment

since 2015, through a programme described as voluntary - but in practice their participation has reportedly been coerced," they said.

The panel said the labour transfer programme was facilitated by a network of vocational training centres, "which focus less on developing professional skills and more on cultural and political indoctrination in a militarised environment".

The experts urged Beijing to clarify how Tibetans

could opt out of the programmes, and to monitor their working conditions in new places of employment.

Tibet has alternated over the centuries between independence and control by China, which says it "peacefully liberated" the rugged plateau in 1951 and brought infrastructure and education to the previously underdeveloped region. But many exiled Tibetans accuse China of repression and eroding their culture.

## UK PM faces first test of comeback credentials in local polls

Rishi Sunak faces his first big electoral test as British prime minister next week in local polls where the opposition Labour Party hopes to capitalise on a year of chaos for the governing Conservatives, ahead of a national election expected next year.

Sunak has tried to restore the credibility of the Conservative Party since coming to office in October, but he has struggled to draw a line under the turmoil that beset his predecessors despite breakthroughs on issues like Brexit, Reuters reported. The scandal-ridden premiership of Boris Johnson and the chaotic economic policies that brought down Liz Truss within two months presented Sunak with an unenviable inheritance: A double-digit poll lead for a resurgent Labour.

With voters going through a cost-of-living crisis and inflation stubbornly high at about 10%, local council votes in much of England on May 4 give Labour an opportunity to prove their electoral credentials. It is towns like Swindon in southwest England which Labour leader Keir Starmer is targeting in a bid to return his party to power at the next national election, due before January 2025.

Swindon has returned lawmakers representing the winning party at every national election since 1983, making it a bellwether and a key target for Labour,

who chose the town for the launch of their local election campaign.

"It's obviously a key staging post in terms of where we anticipate the next general election will be," Jonathan Reynolds, a Labour lawmaker in Starmer's shadow cabinet, told Reuters during a visit to Swindon.

He expressed optimism ahead of the vote, reflecting polls which give Labour an average lead of around 15 percentage points - a substantial lead but well down from highs of around 30 points during Truss's premiership.

Keiran Pedley, director of politics at Ipsos, said Sunak had been a steady influence but would have to deliver on issues like the cost of living to improve his party's ratings further ahead of the next national election.

"Whilst Sunak's personal poll ratings aren't great, they're not toxic in the way that his predecessors have been," he said. Council elections can provide an indication of the public mood but also result in protest votes that overstate the unpopularity of the government, or be swayed by local factors.

David Renard, the Conservative leader of Swindon Borough Council, said the national picture might hinder his attempts to focus the campaign on more local issues.



Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak  
● ALBERTO PEZZALI/POOL VIA REUTERS

## Could Lebanon benefit from Iran-KSA détente?

EXCLUSIVE

For instance, Israel continues to exert pressure and stoke

Page 1 >

tension in Lebanon, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut is actively influencing the situation, and certain extremist groups in the embattled Arab country see their existence of political turmoil.

Despite all these factors, Saudi Arabia holds significant sway over Lebanon's political arena, both in terms of providing financial support to certain domestic factions and in terms of political influence. On one end of the spectrum, Iran is one of the countries that has significant political and spiritual influence in Lebanon and has welcomed Saudi Arabia's fresh approach toward the region. The landmark accord between

Tehran and Riyadh is a result of the latter's reconsiderations.

If Saudi Arabia continues to pursue a policy based on which tensions would ease in Lebanon, while Tehran and Riyadh bring their stances closer together, the political stalemate in Beirut could hopefully break, although Saudi Arabia's influence is not the only factor at play.

The rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with the interplay between these two regional powerhouses, can undoubtedly bring about a brighter future for the West Asian region. This reconciliation has the potential to turn hostility and tension into cooperation and interaction, thereby enhancing the security and progress of the regional countries.