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Research notes

Telescope in sight

Bids are in for a world-class telescope

Linda Nordling
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[The Guardian](#)

Those who will miss the exhilarating rush of kick-off when the World Cup draws to a close this week can take heart. Another international competition with plenty of drama is heating up closer to home. This time the stars have names like Betelgeuse not Beckham.



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If funded, the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) will be the most powerful radio telescope the world has ever seen, with a sensitivity a hundred times that of any in operation today. It will be made up of a network of up to 1,000 dishes of between 30 and 300 metres in diameter, arranged over a huge area. The "array" of dishes will truly be an awe-inspiring sight, and will attract the best of the best in radio astronomy and bring valuable technology to whichever country wins the race to host it.

The dishes will have to be sited in an area with little radio interference, so it's not a coincidence that the four potential host countries possess some of the most remote wildernesses in the world. The high plateaus of the Andes already play host to the Very Large Telescope array of optical telescopes. The Chinese site is located in the lush green valleys in the south-east of the country where the terrain ensures minimal radio interference. The Australian site is in the famously desolate outback, a whopping 900km drive from Perth. And in South Africa, legislation is under way to protect the site in the Karoo, in the centre of the country, from radio interference.

So who will win? It's too early to say. After this week's presentations, the bids will be shortlisted based on their scientific suitability. The shortlist, which could feature one or all four sites, will be handed over to the funders for their meeting in September. So by October, we may know more.

Speculation, of course, is rife. Some say that the southern hemisphere bids have the edge as there is simply less radio interference there than north of the equator. And reports in the South African press have alleged that the country's site has stronger political support than the others, where support comes mainly from industry.

But politics is being kept strictly out of siting discussions, says the SKA steering committee. And only a very few people have actually read through the approximately 3,000 pages of technical evaluation reports that will feed into the imminent deliberations.

A final decision on a site is needed by 2008 in order to stay on schedule and start building in 2011. But even if a host is identified, it remains to be seen whether the funders will be able to drum up the circa \$1bn (£57m) that the whole project is expected to cost. The European Union has recently approved a multi-million grant for the design phase of the project. But much, much more will be necessary to see the project off the ground, and peering into the black of distant space.

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