

Joint Standing Committee on Treaties

Inquiry into Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament

Submission by Citizens' Nuclear Information Center (Tokyo, Japan)
16 January 2009

Introduction

This submission was written on the understanding that the “international treaties involving Australia which relate to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament” referred to in the Inquiry’s terms of reference include bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements to which Australia is a party. The submission addresses the following two topics in which Australia and Japan share a particular interest:

- The Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of Japan for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy (hereafter referred to as “the Australia-Japan Nuclear Cooperation Agreement”, or “the Agreement”)
- The International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), which is co-chaired by Gareth Evans of Australia and Yoriko Kawaguchi of Japan.

Recommendations and brief supporting comments are given below. The attached background paper provides a more detailed analysis. In particular the paper analyzes the risk of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons in future and the prospects for a so-called “nuclear renaissance”. Both of these issues are frequently misrepresented. By avoiding the more sensational claims that are commonly made, the background paper attempts to provide a realistic account of both issues.

Bilateral Nuclear Cooperation Agreements

Recommendations

The report of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties should recommend that:

- Australia withdraw permission for Japan to enrich Australian-origin uranium and reprocess spent nuclear fuel containing Australian-origin uranium;
- reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel be prohibited under all bilateral nuclear cooperation treaties to which Australia is a party;
- Australia refrain from supplying other countries with equipment relating to the enrichment or reprocessing of nuclear material or to the production of heavy water, or cooperating in the development of these technologies.

Reasons

Australia currently permits Japan to enrich Australian-origin uranium and reprocess nuclear fuel produced from Australian-origin uranium. However, Japan’s uranium enrichment and reprocessing programs have experienced major problems. Both programs are uneconomic and it is doubtful whether they will be commercially viable for the foreseeable future.

Uranium enrichment, reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel and production of heavy water are referred to as “sensitive technologies” because of the nuclear proliferation risks which they entail. Although Japan does not have a nuclear weapons program now, that situation could change in future. In that case Australian-origin uranium would inevitably find its way into nuclear weapons.

Besides the longer-term risk of Japan producing nuclear weapons, Japan's uranium enrichment and reprocessing programs send the wrong signal to other potential proliferators, such as Iran. They complicate international efforts for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

For these reasons, by permitting Japan to enrich Australian-origin uranium and to reprocess spent fuel containing Australian-origin uranium, the Australia Japan Nuclear Cooperation Agreement undermines Australia's objectives in the field of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament

Recommendations

The Joint Standing Committee should provide independent and objective advice to the ICNND, while the Australian Parliament should conduct a thorough debate of the implications of the Joint Standing Committee's report for Australia's nuclear non-proliferation and uranium export policies. Specifically, the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties should recommend that the ICNND:

- consider the benefits for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament of a world-wide phase-out of reprocessing;
- seek to generate political support for such a move;
- address the proliferation problems that arise from nuclear energy as a whole;
- refrain from proposing measures to address these problems which would have the undesirable side-effect of promoting uncompetitive nuclear energy programs, or of perpetuating existing programs beyond their natural life;
- rigorously scrutinize proposed multilateral approaches to the nuclear fuel cycle to see if there is a risk that they could exacerbate the problems they are purported to solve.

Reasons

It is widely believed that a "nuclear renaissance" is imminent. It is by no means certain that the "nuclear renaissance" will eventuate, but if it does it will increase the already considerable nuclear proliferation risks associated with nuclear energy programs.

Countries which opt to use nuclear energy should not pursue a "closed fuel cycle" approach. Closed fuel cycles involve the reprocessing of spent fuel, which is unnecessary, uneconomic and polluting. It is also the easiest route to acquiring the ingredients for a nuclear bomb.

Many proposals have been made to address the proliferation risks of nuclear energy and the nuclear fuel cycle, including multilateral approaches. Every effort must be made to find ways to minimize proliferation risks, but there is a danger that some of the proposals being pushed will cause more problems than they solve.

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