

Nuclear Weapons States vs. Nonweapons States

By

Henry Sokolski

Executive Director

The Nonproliferation Policy Education Center

www.npolicy.org

Since 1958, when Irish Foreign Minister Frank Aiken first proposed a nuclear nonproliferation treaty, the question of what the nuclear benefits and responsibilities of nuclear weapons states and nonweapons states should be has been at the crux of tenability for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). A half century of debate over these issues has clarified three things. First, the current set of answers is hardly optimal. It argues that nuclear weapons states must disarm and nonweapons states have an “inalienable” right to any form of nuclear energy so long as it declared to be for “peaceful purposes” and is occasionally inspected by relatively weak international authorities. This view could potentially encourage a world with more Irans and North Koreas -- states that have used their “inalienable right” to peaceful nuclear energy to get to or beyond the very brink of acquiring bombs. Second, this current view is at odds with the original justification for the NPT that Frank Aiken and others advocated. That view emphasized that stemming the horizontal nuclear proliferation was prerequisite to any hope of achieving vertical nuclear disarmament and that nonproliferation benefited nonweapons states at least as much as weapons states in reducing the threat of nuclear war and arms competitions. It also presumed spreading nuclear power technology risked nuclear weapons proliferation, and that, therefore, nonweapons states should welcome intrusive inspections of their facilities to help demonstrate the feasibility of verifying the even more challenging task of nuclear disarmament. What is needed to get nonweapons states to reconsider their unqualified demands to some of the most dangerous forms of nuclear energy (e.g., nuclear fuel making) as a “right” today? Demonstrating nuclear power’s commercial inferiority in reducing carbon emissions in the quickest cheapest fashion would help. This would require an effort in the G-20 or other international forms to compare the full costs (including government subsidies) and time requirements of deploying different commercial energy projects. It also would be helpful to get states to be more candid about what nuclear activities and materials the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) can and cannot safeguard to provide timely warning of military diversions as required by Article III of the NPT. If this was done, a reinterpretation of Article IV might be possible similar to how Article V of the NPT has been reinterpreted.

Europe and Nuclear Security

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Henry Sokolski

Executive Director

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Any European view of nuclear security naturally focuses on how best to secure deployed nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons usable fuels against theft or attack. It also focuses on how best to manage or limit deployed tactical nuclear weapons in the region. After Fukushima and the Arab Spring, though, any two more topics have to be included. The first are the dangers of failing to meet the requirements of civilian nuclear plant design, construction and operations safety; the potential vulnerability of such plants to terrorist or hostile state-induced accidents. The second is the potential for Europe's least integrated state, Turkey, to develop a nuclear weapons option as an adjunct to its own civilian nuclear power program. Insufficient cooling for one or two hours of the nuclear core of Europe's most popular nuclear power design – the light water reactor -- can result in massive fuel failures, followed by possible radiological releases. Also, these systems' spent fuel ponds and that of other reactors and reprocessing facilities could potentially lose coolant and release major amounts of radioactivity. Natural disasters, terrorist and hostile states attacks, could induce such coolant losses by forcing the failure of critical electrical lines, plant software, transformers, back up diesels, key valves, coolant pumps, pond structures, etc. Such vulnerabilities put a premium on sound operation, design, and safe plant location. Recent concerns about Russian plants located in earthquake zones (e.g., Turkey); upstream from major cities (e.g., on the Vilna River) and on seismically active sites (e.g., at Belene) are indicative of the kind of worries Europe faces but may not be able to work as a part of the current EU nuclear power stress test effort. In addition, the IAEA's director has warned that Stuxnet-like attacks may be launched against advanced states' nuclear plants. Nuclear plant failures and the costly evacuation and public safety headaches that followed have already challenged the political viability of the Soviet Union after Chernobyl and, to a lesser extent, Japan after Fukushima. As for Turkey, its earlier interest some 30 years ago in using its civilian program as a cover for a developing a nuclear weapons option, might revive. This could enable Turkey to agree to stop basing NATO nuclear weapons without giving up on a nuclear weapons option. Such a development could easily challenge the continued cohesion of NATO.