

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

Don't block U.S.-Russian nuclear cooperation

BY PAVEL PODVIG | 22 MAY 2008

Two weeks ago, the United States and Russia signed an agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation, commonly known as a "123 agreement." It was immediately attacked from all sides. Some members of Congress urged the Bush administration not to submit the document to Congress and threatened to block it once they did. Meanwhile, nuclear skeptics in Russia raised concerns that the agreement could revitalize the idea of importing foreign spent nuclear fuel into Russia or strengthen the U.S.-led Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. For their part, U.S. nuclear enthusiasts suspected Russia of attempting to gain access to advanced U.S. nuclear technologies, which, they argued, Moscow could use to establish a competitive advantage in the international nuclear trade.

There are many good reasons why such a nuclear deal should receive scrutiny and raise questions, but in this case, the opponents of the U.S.-Russian agreement are wrong. Whatever their concerns, blocking the cooperation agreement is the worst way to address them.

"Congressional disapproval of U.S.-Russian civilian nuclear cooperation would weaken pro-U.S. forces in Russia and empower those who engage in confrontational anti-American rhetoric."

The congressional arguments against U.S.-Russian nuclear cooperation have a long history and are well-known. The deal breaker is Russia's nuclear assistance to Iran, which some members of Congress believe should disqualify Moscow from being able to sign a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States. In September 2007, the House of Representatives passed a bill that directly prohibited signing a 123 agreement with Russia; a similar bill is now under consideration in the Senate. Although the agreement itself doesn't require explicit congressional consent,

Congress could block it by passing a resolution of disapproval--a possible outcome given the strength of congressional support for these bills.

But Congress will be disappointed if it thinks this will hinder Iran's nuclear program. Russia is helping Tehran construct a nuclear reactor in Bushehr, which has nothing to do with uranium enrichment--the most serious proliferation danger. Theoretically, Russia could use Bushehr as leverage to influence Iran's position on enrichment, but there are limits to that type of pressure. And at this point, any attempt to stop the Bushehr reactor could harm nonproliferation *not* help it: The international community is trying to assure non-nuclear states that they will have reliable access to civilian nuclear power; to do so, it must prove that these commitments are safe from U.S. political pressure.

Moreover, by blocking the U.S.-Russian agreement, Congress would undermine those in Russia who are arguing that Moscow should position itself as a responsible supplier of nuclear services and help the international community limit the scale of Iran's nuclear program. In addition, it would reinforce an already popular view in Russia that Washington is an unreliable partner who is determined to limit Moscow's access to Western markets. In other words, congressional disapproval would weaken pro-U.S. forces in Russia and empower those who engage in confrontational anti-American rhetoric. This is hardly a smart policy.

As for the concerns of environmental groups that the 123 agreement could bolster the plan to import spent nuclear fuel to Russia, they're largely unwarranted. The plan calls for importing U.S.-origin spent fuel to Russia for storage and disposal. A few years ago, when the Russian nuclear industry strongly supported such a plan, the lack of a nuclear cooperation agreement between Moscow and Washington was a critical obstacle. But this is no longer the case. Initial enthusiasm for the plan has waned as customers aren't exactly lining up to send their spent fuel to Russia. And when the United States made clear that it would object to the reprocessing of U.S.-origin fuel, the Russian nuclear industry, which planned on reprocessing the fuel to recover plutonium, stopped supporting the arrangement.

The current 123 agreement won't change any of this. Washington specifically excluded reprocessing from the list of activities that it will allow, meaning that bringing U.S.-origin fuel into Russia will remain an unattractive option for Moscow. Whatever the industry may think about the economic merits of this arrangement, it can't ignore the opposition to the plan that has been generated by persistent pressure from Russian environmental groups. The Russian public may be sympathetic to using the spent fuel to recover plutonium and produce electricity--a grand vision promoted by the Russian nuclear industry--but it's not ready to accept the idea of permanently burying nuclear waste somewhere in Siberia. Russian officials already

pledged not to bring foreign-origin spent fuel into the country, and it's unlikely that the cooperation agreement would change the situation.

Finally, the notion that Russia is trying to get access to the best U.S. nuclear technologies seems contrived. Certainly, Russia would benefit from the cooperation, but in many areas, the United States stands to benefit more. For instance, U.S. power utilities would have access to Russian uranium enrichment and fuel fabrication services. Besides, these days, most advanced nuclear technologies require close international cooperation anyway.

Overlooked by nearly all of its opponents is the fact that the cooperation agreement is mostly a political document that could create a framework for a normal working partnership between Moscow and Washington. There are certainly many unresolved issues in the U.S.-Russian relationship--Iran among them. Similarly, there are legitimate concerns about many nuclear projects that the 123 agreement might potentially facilitate--i.e., the push for reprocessing and a plutonium economy. But all of these issues and projects should be discussed individually and not bundled artificially into one politically charged issue linked to a long list of grievances that Washington has about Moscow. Politicizing the issue of civilian nuclear cooperation would only make a reasonable discussion of substantial issues much more difficult than it needs to be.

Copyright © 2009 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. All Rights Reserved.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/26/2009 - 18:02):

<http://www.thebulletin.org/node/2619>

