

Container Ships And Bulk Tankers To Go Nuclear?

By [Global Research](#)

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UK - WORLDWIDE - Just two weeks after two senior executives from the [BMT Group](#) Ltd., specialists in maritime design, engineering and risk management, were invited to become members of [Lloyd's Register's](#) Technical Committee came the announcement that the two organisations were joining with Greek bulk tanker and container ship operators [Enterprises Shipping and Trading S.A.](#) and US based atomic energy experts [Hyperion Power](#) in a bid to investigate the practicability of small modular nuclear reactors as the power plants for freight vessels of the future.

The project was announced in mid November and executives at Lloyds Register have publicly stated they anticipate seeing nuclear powered ships plying the commercial cargo routes in less time than most people imagine. To accommodate the anticipated development Lloyds are to change their rules regarding the certification of the new generation vessels and draft proposals for the technical format are under consideration at the moment.

To the surprise of some none of this is new ground; most people of course are familiar with the capabilities of the nuclear powered submarines and most in the shipping world know of the small Russian fleet of atomic icebreakers which are currently making the [new ocean trade routes](#) around the top of the world a possibility. Fewer however will remember the ill fated *Mutsu*, a Japanese vessel built in 1972 which sailed eventually, after reported radiation leaks and in the face of environmental protests, in 1974.

The *Mutsu* never carried any commercial cargo however unlike the *Otto Hahn*, another of the only four nuclear powered merchant freighters so far constructed. After launching for sea trials and intensive tests in 1964 the German vessel traded successfully between 1970 to 1979 when she exchanged her power plant for diesel and carried on in service until scrapped on the [Alang beaches](#) only last year.

The first of the nuclear 'freighters' was the US built NS (note the initials)*Savannah* in the late 1950's. More of a test bed and demonstrator than a practical cargo carrier she currently lies in Baltimore awarded the status of National Historic Landmark and awaiting her final fate.

The latest and last addition to this elite club of four is the *Sevmorput*, named after the Northern passage and still in service, since commissioning in 1988 but not as a freight carrier. The Russian fleet is to be extended and many see the nuclear option as the only truly emission free option at a time when pollution from shipping is firmly in the spotlight.

One of the gang of four involved in the new project, Hyperion, are a company devoted to commercialising the small modular nuclear reactor type developed by the scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. The system runs on low-enriched uranium and consists of a factory sealed unit and, similar to a modern car battery, contains no user serviceable parts. The principle is to provide the unit, suitably shielded against the rigours of ocean travel, which is then returned to the manufacturers after around seven years for refuelling.

Obviously any marine application holds more risk than a land based use where the power plant can be buried to avoid interference, but Lloyds have an exemplary track record of examining technological advances and incorporating into a regulatory framework. This latest venture will no doubt prove one of their stiffest challenges given the unique risks of the elements involved and the regulator will doubtless consider all relevant factors from longevity of hull and components to collision factors and shipwreck scenarios.

Photo:- Two non military nuclear ships in port together. The Russian cargo ship *Sevmorput* to the left of the discarded nuclear powered Arktika class icebreaker NS *Sibir*. Photo courtesy of Терский берег.

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