

Proliferation of Toxic Technologies: Nuclear Power and Nuclear Weapons

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*Speaking a few months after the disaster at Fukushima, Japanese novelist **Haruki Murakami** said, “Nuclear power plants, which were supposed to be efficient, offer us a vision of hell.” He spoke about how the nuclear power industry insisted that this was an efficient, clean, and safe source of energy—even though it isn’t. And he connected nuclear power to nuclear weapons, arguing that the experience of the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki should have motivated the development of non-nuclear, renewable sources of energy after World War Two.*

Murakami was right to link nuclear power and nuclear weapons. They are connected through their effects, through their creation, and through their proliferation.

Both are characterised by their inherent risks and capacity to unleash uniquely horrifying forms of devastation upon human bodies, the environment, and our socioeconomic infrastructure.



The immediate effects of even a single nuclear weapon detonation are horrifying and overwhelming. One detonation will cause tens of thousands of casualties and inflict immediate and irreversible damage to infrastructure, industry, livelihoods, and human lives. The effects will persist over time, devastating human health, the environment, and our economies for years to come. These impacts will wreak havoc on food production, natural disasters, and displace entire populations.

Meanwhile, nuclear power is the most expensive and dangerous way to boil water to turn a turbine. Nuclear power contains the inherent potential for catastrophe. There is no such thing as a safe nuclear reactor. All aspects of the nuclear fuel chain, from mining uranium ore to storing radioactive waste, are devastating for the earth and all species living upon it. Radiation is long lasting and has inter-generational effects.

Furthermore, the spread of nuclear energy around the world since 1953 has enabled the development of nuclear weapons in several countries, as well as to the proliferation of nuclear materials and technology that are becoming increasingly susceptible to terrorist attack or accidents. The continued existence of nuclear fuel chain facilities, technology, and material makes it more difficult to reach a world free of nuclear weapons. Eliminating all nuclear materials and technology, whatever its designated purpose, is the only way to ensure that it does not result in catastrophe, by accident or design.

Within the NPT context, nuclear energy is upheld by most states as an “inalienable right”. This means that most states laud its perceived benefits and promote its expansion, regardless of the risks to humanity, the environment, and proliferation. A few states parties recognise these inherent risks and have chosen not to pursue or to phase out nuclear power as part of their energy mixes. The more states parties that follow this path, the better for us all.

Many of the states supporting nuclear power are the same that support nuclear weapons. In both cases this is because they benefit from these technologies—in terms of power or economy. But whereas most developing states demand nuclear disarmament, some simultaneously seek to develop nuclear energy for various applications. But nuclear energy is not a solution to development or to the climate crisis. It continues being promoted as such—this has everything to do with capitalism and nothing to do with protecting the planet or its people.

For the nuclear energy industry, the primary motive for operation is profit. History shows us that increasing profit is often best achieved in ways that are not consistent with designing or operating the relevant equipment for the lowest risk to humanity or the planet. Scientists and activists alike have noted that nuclear power, which produces energy “in large, expensive, centralized facilities” is not useful “for solving the energy needs of the vast majority of [the world’s] population, much less so in a way that offers any net environmental gains.” Profit is less likely to be achieved by honestly exploring alternative sources of energy that might necessitate initial investments, or that might not be eligible for the same government (i.e. taxpayer-funded) subsidies as nuclear is in many countries.

“Nuclear weapons still exist today in thousands, a disturbing and sinister reality which the founders of the NPT would not have possibly anticipated, that 49 years after concluding the Treaty, the world continues to be threatened from the most destructive weapons ever created,” said Egypt during Monday’s discussion on non-proliferation.

Part of the reason these weapons still exist is that nothing has yet been done to stop the production or possession of fissile materials or nuclear technologies.



Nuclear—whether for energy or weapons—is about

destruction but its proponents sell it as security, as safety, and even as life itself. Yet just now, on 9 May 2017, there was an accident at the Hanford nuclear site in the United States. An evacuation was ordered after a tunnel at the plutonium finishing plant collapsed. This is the site where the plutonium for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki was made. It is currently the largest radioactive waste dump in the United States. The tunnel affected by the collapse was reportedly full of highly contaminated materials, including radioactive trains that transport fuel rods.

The bottom line for safety, security, environmental sustainability, and human well-being is that the production, spread, and use of these toxic technologies and materials, whether for weapons or energy, must end.

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