



## **New Saudi Reactors: Proliferation Concerns**

Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy

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Recent events have called attention to a serious nuclear proliferation risk that states parties should address at the 10th Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. Shortly before the present conference met, a member state of the NPT, Saudi Arabia, invited three nuclear technology suppliers—South Korea, Russia, and China—to submit bids for the construction of two new reactors.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia has publicly discussed a possible decision to acquire nuclear weapons under some circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other states that have recently constructed civilian nuclear facilities (e.g. the United Arab Emirates), Saudi Arabia has refused to agree to refrain from enriching uranium, or from processing spent fuel to produce plutonium. Perhaps most importantly, it has refused to add the Additional Protocol to its safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Under these circumstances, construction of the proposed facilities without any additional safeguards would have a seriously destabilizing effect on the entire non-proliferation regime. Even if the member state acquiring the facility ultimately did not manufacture nuclear weapons, the fact that it would acquire the capacity to do so could impel other states in the region to take similar measures.

This development would come at an extremely fragile time for the NPT. Even before the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the blow to credibility of negative security assurances, the NPT was under severe strain from nuclear modernization programs pursued by all of the P5 nuclear weapon states and the lack of progress on disarmament negotiations mandated by Article VI. Further weakening of the NPT would worsen an already dangerous climate of nuclear risk. Now more than ever, it is critically important for states parties to the treaty to honor their obligations of strict compliance with the NPT and good faith support for its objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Sikolsky, “Will Seoul and Washington make Riyadh nuclear-weapons ready?”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 26 July 2022

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, citing a CBS News [report](#), 15 March 2018.

The clear intent of the NPT is to require all transfers of sensitive civilian nuclear technology to be accompanied by credible and reliable safeguards. That was originally to be accomplished by the requirement that all purchasers have a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the IAEA.<sup>3</sup> However, subsequent experience (notably the discovery of undeclared programs in Iraq and North Korea) revealed gaps in this approach, and the Additional Protocol was the result.<sup>4</sup> In order to uphold the NPT and support its objectives, the Additional Protocol should apply to all civilian nuclear technology transfers.

States parties should call upon purchasers of civilian nuclear technology to agree that they will refrain from enriching uranium and from processing spent fuel to produce plutonium, as well as agree to adopt the Additional Protocol in their safeguards agreements with the IAEA. Suppliers should be called upon not to transfer such technology to any state that has not met these conditions.

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<sup>3</sup> "Each State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to provide: (a) source or special fissionable material, or (b) equipment or material especially designed or prepared for the processing, use or production of special fissionable material, to any non-nuclear-weapon State for peaceful purposes, unless the source or special fissionable material shall be subject to the safeguards required by this Article." Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Art. III(2).

<sup>4</sup> "[IAEA Safeguards At-a-Glance](#)," Arms Control Association, updated February 2022