

A Multilateral Framework for the Civil use of Nuclear Energy?

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Conference Report

On October 6th/7th in Brussels, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung gathered experts from Brazil, China, Egypt, the USA and the EU to discuss the issue of civil use of nuclear energy. In a public debate and during an expert roundtable the supposed phenomenon of a renaissance of the civil use of nuclear energy was questioned and risks of proliferation and multilateral approaches to prevent it were reviewed.

Is it correct to characterize the civil use of nuclear energy as a “renaissance”? Opinion on this issue was divided. Lutz Mez, Professor at the Free University of Berlin, argued that the relevance of nuclear energy on a global scale is currently declining. He highlighted this with the decreasing nuclear portion of the whole energy supply, the small amount of new planned nuclear power plants (NPP), a lack of skilled personal and the challenging competition of rising renewable energies.



Prof. Luiz Pinguelli Rosa,
University of Rio de Janeiro

Viewing this issue from a national perspective, several speakers accounted more significance to nuclear energy. With regards to the growing demand of energy in rising powers or developing countries it might seem an alternative. Advocates cite energy security and low CO₂ emissions as arguments to consider it as the technology of the future. However, crucial questions still remain to be answered. How could countries in need for energy bear such vast investment? How to dispose satisfactorily and safely nuclear waste? The prospect that unforeseeable incidents at NPPs cannot be contained entirely does not quite make the point for overall approval of nuclear energy. Wouldn't future investments in nuclear energy absorb funds which could be more sustainably placed in renewable energies?

Albeit the controversy regarding the significance of nuclear energy, all speakers agreed on the need of a multilateral approach to face proliferation risks. Oliver Meier, from the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy in Germany, pointed out that more and more countries will dispose of nuclear technology. Therefore the risk of nuclear proliferation is increasing and, accordingly, the necessity for international cooperation is apparent. Mr Meier also drew attention to the sensitivity of the issue and the danger of an un-controlled proliferation of nuclear technology.



Mary Beth Nikitin, researcher at the US-Congress

With the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC/Euratom) the European Union has a founding element, which stimulated co-operation in a highly sensitive domain in spite of mutual distrust after the devastation of two world wars. With the success of European integration Euratom proves to be a successful model of multilateralism and could be applied as good example for other regional cooperation. With their agreement on nuclear co-operation Brazil and Argentina have already undertaken a step into this direction.

To accommodate the demand of fuel supply of countries interested in nuclear energy, as well as taking account of proliferations risks, several proposals for a multilateral framework of a fuel cycle are being discussed. These proposals may be characterised into three different types: a multilateral fuel bank in which countries could have an equal share, political assurances to provide supply, or establishing an international supply instrument (enrichment facility outside a current provider state). Whichever solution is set up, it will outline the relationship between supplier and consumer countries and therefore should be determined in a sense of joint ownership. All participants agreed on the importance the International Atomic Energy Agency should play in this process. Currently, however, the discussion within the IAEE seems to be in deadlock, expected only to be unblocked after the inauguration of a new Director General.

The experts were quite sure that a global "Multilateral framework" with the spirit of cooperation is necessary for a safe and civil use of nuclear energy and touches incorporating also the issue of nuclear disarmament and reduction of asymmetry.

This conference was part of a series of international policy dialogues planned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2009 and 2010, in order to tackle different aspects of global climate and energy policy: Financing of climate policy, the role of nuclear energy, bio energy, renewable energies, energy efficiency, global energy governance, and world trade. The objective of this conference series is to influence the reconstruction of the global energy sector to ensure energy security as a response to the decline of fossil fuels.

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