

US GNEP Initiative: Some thoughts on France's initial reaction

At the outset, let me say that these comments have been shared with our American friends since the beginning of the US reflection on this issue. Therefore, these views will not constitute any surprise for the US panellists who are with us today.

I will start by recalling that the international conference on nuclear power for the 21st century organized by OECD and IAEA and held in Paris in March 2005 stated that "A vast majority of participants affirmed that nuclear power can make a major contribution to meeting energy needs and sustaining the world's development in the 21st century, for a large number of both developed and developing countries".

Expanding nuclear energy contributes to meeting, in a safe and secure way concerns about energy supply security, sustainable development, protection of the environment, while minimizing the risk of proliferation.

We understand that this initiative consists in promoting from the outset an international cooperation on developing and demonstrating advanced and proliferation resistant technologies, in particular fuel recycling technologies, as well as in creating an international consortium of supplier countries with advanced nuclear programs and complete fuel cycle technologies, offering enrichment and reprocessing-recycling services to other countries.

We too believe that, in the context of non-proliferation efforts as well as energy supply security concerns, it is important that all states, wishing to and complying with their international obligations, have access to nuclear fuels and recycling-reprocessing services. We also share the view that recycling spent nuclear fuel gives an important contribution to power generation and the rational use of uranium resources, while reducing the amount of radioactive wastes to be disposed of.

For these reasons, France support and welcome the objectives of the global nuclear energy partnership (GNEP).

To contribute to the debate, I will share with you our preliminary comments

1. France stresses the political importance of not giving any impression that the GNEP initiative could in any way deprive states parties to the NPT of any rights pursuant to the Treaty. On the contrary, this initiative should underline that it is aimed at helping countries to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (as stated in article IV of the NPT).
2. We also stressed that the development of proliferation resistant technologies cannot be considered as a substitute to implementation of the IAEA safeguards and additional protocol, as well as other measures aimed at preventing proliferation risks. It is only a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic measures which would give proper assurances that these new technologies and facilities will not be diverted for non allowed purposes. It seems to us therefore that, within the context of GNEP initiative, it is important to work on new safeguards measures and or implementation.

3. We are of the view that the GNEP cooperation on developing advanced spent fuel recycling technologies shall not disqualify existing reprocessing-recycling technologies that do not lead states to accumulate separated plutonium, nor exclude any utilisation of MOX fuel in countries complying with their international obligations. We believe that using MOX fuel in existing GEN II/GEN III reactors contribute to non proliferation efforts.

We also want to underline that the latest generation, still under optimization, of reprocessing-recycling technologies (GEN III) does not separate plutonium. It should be noted that GEN IV reprocessing-recycling technologies, even if researched diligently by the international community, will take time to be implemented at an industrial scale and will not be available until the fleet of commercial GEN IV reactors is put into operation (around 2040). In the meantime, GEN III reprocessing-recycling technologies achieving the same goal of not separating plutonium could be optimized, in parallel, within the same GNEP framework, and implemented at the industrial scale prior to GEN IV with recycling in GEN II/GEN III reactors.

This also would allow a decrease on uranium demand which could reach 25% in a context of tensions on the uranium market at a time where uranium price has been multiplied by four in the last five years.

4. We note that the proposed consortium of supplier's countries would offer a supply of power reactor fuel to customer countries, compliant with their international obligations, and take back the spent nuclear fuel. Supplier's countries would then recycle plutonium and burn long-lived actinides in their fast reactors, and would dispose of the remaining foreign radioactive wastes at no cost for the customer countries.

Experience shows that disposal of foreign waste raise major political and public acceptance issues in most supplier countries. As an example, French law prohibits any stockpiling of foreign spent fuel, except for reprocessing and recycling, and waste within the French territory, imposing the return of remaining radioactive waste to customer countries after spent fuel treatment in French facilities.

In particular, it is important not giving the impression that actual users of nuclear energy would not be responsible before actual and future generations of the management of ultimate radioactive wastes.

In addition, the cost for supplier countries of managing foreign spent fuel and waste would be far from negligible. The question of financing those costs by the consortium of supplier countries should be addressed.

5. We think that this initiative should not exclude as a matter of principle any transfer, in a distant future, to customer countries, complying with their international obligations, of advanced and proliferation resistant spent fuel reprocessing-recycling technologies, as well as fast reactors.

Moreover, we are not convinced that a mechanism excluding the possibility for having new countries with these advanced fuel cycle technologies and fast reactors would be sustainable in a long term perspective. The capacity of the supplier countries to recycle plutonium and minor actinides and to burn them in their own reactors will be limited and it is doubtful that they will be able to recycle plutonium and burn actinides produced everywhere in the world in the future.

6. Nevertheless, we share the view that it is necessary for non proliferation reasons to limit the number of countries cooperating on developing and demonstrating those advanced technologies during the R&D phase.
7. Finally, I want to recall what our heads of States have agreed at the 2004 G8 Sea Island summit: “With a view to allow the world to safely enjoy the benefits of peaceful nuclear energy without adding to the danger of weapons proliferation, we will work to establish new measures so that sensitive nuclear items with proliferation potential will not be exported to states that may seek to use them for weapons purposes, or allow them to fall into terrorist hands. The export of such items should only occur pursuant to criteria consistent with global non proliferation norms and to states rigorously committed to those norms”.

Two years later, in parallel to the development of the global nuclear energy partnership, we should endeavour to amend the nuclear suppliers group (NSG) guidelines at its next Plenary meeting in Rio at the end of May according to the G-8 action plan on non-proliferation. A common proposal, by Russia and France, is on the table and has received a broad support during the past discussions on this issue. We hope that a consensus decision on this basis could be reached at the earliest.

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