

Nuclear Shorts

Scientists & NGOs to Biden: ‘Get Rid of ICBMs’

Almost 700 award-winning scientists have urged President Biden to cancel the \$246 billion Air Force program to replace today’s 400 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and to “consider eliminating silo-based” missiles altogether. The Minuteman IIIs are the subject of Nukewatch’s 1988 book *Nuclear Heartland*, and its 2015 *Revised Edition*, which long ago made the case for abolition. Dated Dec. 16, 2021, the letter’s signers include 21 Nobel Laureates, who note that ICBMs are the nuclear weapons most vulnerable to being attacked and are also the ones most likely to be launched first — perhaps in response to a false alarm. The scientists’ letter neglected to mention that ICBM launch control crews and their commanding officers have been scandalized in the 2010s by convictions and expulsions in cases of domestic violence, drug trafficking, corruption, cheating on Air Force exams, and cover-ups. The open letter was followed a month later by a group of sixty U.S. nongovernmental organizations that issued “A Call to Eliminate ICBMs,” calling them a colossal waste of money and a threat to civilization. The January 12 declaration, organized by Roots Action and Just Foreign Policy, said “There is no more important step the United States could take to reduce the chances of a global nuclear holocaust than to eliminate its ICBMs.”

— Jake Johnson, Common Dreams, and Roots Action, Jan. 12, 2022; *Sputnik International*, Dec. 18, 2021; and *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2021

Santa Susana Meltdown Worst Ever in U.S.

The Sodium Reactor Experiment was operated by the Atomic Energy Commission at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory, about 18 miles northwest of Hollywood. Andrew Cockburn reported on the little-known radiation hot spot near Los Angeles in his cover story in the January 2022 *Harpers*, “Spent Fuel: The risky resurgence of nuclear power.” This is a short excerpt: In July 1959, “the plant’s coolant system failed and its uranium oxide fuel rods began melting down. With the reactor running out of control and set to explode, desperate operators deliberately released huge amounts of radioactive material into the air for nearly two weeks, making it almost certainly the most dangerous nuclear accident in U.S. history. The amount of iodine-131 alone spewed into the southern California atmosphere was two hundred and sixty times that released at Three Mile Island, which is generally regarded as the worst ever U.S. nuclear disaster.* None of this was revealed to the public, who were told merely that a ‘technical’ fault had occurred, one that was ‘not an indication of unsafe reactor conditions.’ As greater Los Angeles boomed in the following years, the area around the reactor site — originally chosen for its distance from population centers — was flooded with new residents. No one informed them of the astronomical levels of radioactive contaminants seeded deep in the soil.”

* Editor’s note: Worse than Three Mile Island was the 1979 Church Rock, New Mexico uranium mill collapse that released to the Puerco River over four times the estimated dispersal of radiation from TMI.

Report: New Small Reactor Design “too late, too expensive, too risky, too uncertain”

A new type of nuclear reactor that would provide electricity to at least four states in the Western U.S. poses financial risks for utilities and their customers, according to a report released Feb. 17 by the Ohio-based Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA). The project’s owner and the company developing the reactor immediately criticized the report, which said the small modular nuclear reactor being developed by NuScale Power in Oregon is “too late, too expensive, too risky and too uncertain.” The NuScale design is the only small-scale reactor to win approval so far from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is poised to issue a rule this summer that would fully certify it. The report from the IEEFA says it’s likely the NuScale reactor will take longer to build than estimated and that the final cost of its electricity will be higher than anticipated and greater than the cost of power from renewables. — AP, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Feb. 18; IEEFA Report, Feb. 17, 2022

— *Shorts compiled by Christine Manwiller, Beyond Nuclear, Andrew Cockburn and John LaForge.*

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China to Sign Southeast Asia Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty

China could become the first nuclear weapon state to sign the Bangkok Treaty which establishes a nuclear weapon-free zone in Southeast Asia. On Nov. 22, 2021, President Xi Jinping announced his intention to sign the agreement, which entered into force in 1997 after being signed by all ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. China’s support for the Treaty could be a political response to the new “AUKUS” alliance between the U.S., Britain, and Australia, under which the U.S. and Britain have agreed to equip Australia with a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. (See Winter 2021-22 *Quarterly*) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticized news of the submarine construction plan calling it a threat to the efforts of the Bangkok Treaty to create a nuclear-free zone. According to Dr. Ryan Musto, a Fellow with the Center for International Security and Cooperation, the U.S. should consider joining the Treaty with a stipulation regarding articles it would not obey. Otherwise, Musto wrote for *Lawfareblog.com*, certain “submarine patrols would be outlawed,” because “under the treaty, the U.S. would be unable to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against an enemy vessel within the zone. It also would be unable to use a nuclear-armed submarine within the zone to attack a target elsewhere.” The Treaty zone covers the territories, continental shelves, and “exclusive economic zones” of the countries that have had it ratified.

— Center for Air Power Studies, Jan. 7, 2022; *Lawfareblog.com*, Dec 9, 2021; Nuclear Threat Initiative, “Bangkok Treaty”



Is it the *Titanic*? *Exxon Valdez*? *Edmund Fitzgerald*? No, it’s China’s floating nuclear reactor concept, the *ACPR50S*, being built to run oil rigs.

Sea Monsters Multiplying

China is now the third country to invest in floating nuclear reactors, after the U.S. and Russia. The 30,000-ton reactor ship *ACPR50S* may be completed this year, the *South China Morning Post* said, and could be the first in a fleet. The reactors have been touted as means of reducing China’s carbon footprint, *EurAsian Times* reports, but they are headed to China’s east coast to power oil rigs! Russia launched the *Akademik Lomonosov* in December 2019, the first floating double nuclear reactor to be built since the 1960s. Nukewatch and others condemned the overwhelming dangers involved which we called “reckless endangerment of the public commons.” The most obvious risk is capsizing, especially considering the increasing intensity of storms caused by climate change. Ship engineers behind the program claim that the reactor can withstand hurricane-force winds, but they admit that the “ship body must not capsize under any circumstances.” This would lead to a loss-of-coolant and meltdown, which would devastate sea life and nearby coastal areas. Chris Gadowski, a nuclear analyst at Bloomberg New Energy Finance, told the *Guardian*, “It wasn’t so long ago that the Philippines was the site of a major tsunami, and I don’t know how you would hedge against a risk like that.” Jan Haverkamp, with Greenpeace, said floating reactors combine “all of the flaws and risks of larger land-based nuclear power stations” with “extra risks from the unpredictability of operating in coastal areas and transport over the high seas — particularly in a loaded state,” the *Guardian* noted.

— *EurAsianTimes*, Dec 15, and *South China Morning Post*, Dec. 14, 2021; the *Guardian*, Dec 17, 2020; and Nukewatch *Quarterly*, July 2018.

U.S. Regulators Reject Application to Build and Operate ‘Micro’ Reactor

On January 6, 2022, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff denied the small start-up Oklo Corporation’s application for a “novel” combined “construction and operating license” for what Beyond Nuclear called an “atomic power cathedral in the woods” at the Idaho National Laboratory. The NRC’s denial was based on plain insufficiency in the details Oklo presented for its “Aurora micro-reactor.” Beyond Nuclear, in Tacoma Park Maryland, with the support of a coalition of safe energy and environmental advocate groups including Nukewatch, had petitioned to intervene in the sketchy reactor design last year but were denied intervenor status by the NRC, which called the petition “premature.” It would have saved staff time and taxpayer money to have scrapped Oklo’s application as the critics requested. — Beyond Nuclear, December 2021

Biden Urges Japan to Shun Nuclear Ban Treaty Meeting

The first “Meeting of States Parties” — countries that have ratified the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) outlawing the “development, testing, possession and use of nuclear weapons” — will take place this June in Vienna. According to U.S. government sources, President Biden has pressured Japan not to attend the meetings. In 2020, the Komeito Party, part of Japan’s coalition government, urged minister of foreign affairs Toshimitsu Motegi to participate as an observer. Biden’s pressure follows Germany’s announced intention to participate also as an observer, making it the only country that hosts nuclear weapons to do so, although both Germany and Japan have parroted the U.S. government’s rejection of the TPNW. Prime Minister Fumio Mishida has “no concrete plans” to join the Vienna meeting, according to a statement made last December. Biden’s action recalls the Trump White House’s attempts in October 2020 to force parties to the treaty to withdraw their ratifications. “That the Trump administration is pressuring countries to withdraw from a UN-backed disarmament treaty is an unprecedented action in international relations,” said Beatrice Fihn of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. “That the U.S. goes so far ... shows how fearful they are of the treaty’s impact and growing support.” To date, 59 countries have ratified the TPNW and 86 have signed, although none of the nuclear weapons states have done so. — *Kyodo News*, Feb. 1, 2022; Dec. 27, and 21, 2021; and AP, Oct. 21, 2020

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