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Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Cooperation (3)

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Question: Why does the nuclear submarine cooperation between the US, the UK and Australia constitute a challenge to the IAEA non-proliferation safeguards system?

Embassy Spokesperson: The US, the UK and Australia are pressing the IAEA to invoke Article 14 of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) to make safeguards arrangements with Australia regarding nuclear submarines, which is essentially coercing the IAEA Secretariat into making safeguards exemption arrangements. It seriously compromises the authority of the IAEA, deals a blow to the Agency's safeguards system and undermines the international community's confidence in multilateralism.

Article 14 of the CSA allows for non-application of safeguards for the use of nuclear material in "a non-proscribed military activity". However, the international community has not reached any consensus on the definition of such military activity and there are huge divergences on the applicability of Article 14. All these are widely perceived as outstanding issues in the field of international nuclear arms control and concern the interests of all IAEA member states, which should be discussed and agreed upon by all interested IAEA member states through an intergovernmental process, taking into account the Agency's previous practice of strengthening the safeguards system. That is what it means to uphold true multilateralism. The three countries and the IAEA Secretariat have no right to make interpretations of their own, still less strike a deal between themselves and impose it on the entire membership.

In accordance with Article 14, the Agency shall be kept informed of the total amount and composition of the nuclear material in naval nuclear propulsion reactors, but should not involve any "classified knowledge of the military activity". Due to US requirements on the classification of technology and the whereabouts of nuclear submarines, it will be difficult for countries concerned to notify the Agency of the relevant information or accept its verification. As a result, the IAEA Secretariat can hardly achieve any effective safeguards arrangement in accordance with Article 14, nor is it able to carry out effective supervision of the nuclear material in Australia's submarine nuclear propulsion reactors. Article 14 therefore will lose its deterrence effect and not be able to effectively prevent nuclear proliferation risks.

The action of the US, the UK and Australia tramples on the purpose of the NPT and abuses the relevant provisions in disregard of the opposition of the vast number of countries. Their purpose is all clear to see and unpopular. We urge the IAEA to perform its non-proliferation duties and not to endorse nuclear proliferation by the three countries. In the meantime, China calls on all IAEA member states to actively promote the intergovernmental process, seek a solution to the safeguards issue in relation to the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation, and safeguard the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, so as to keep the world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and maintain international peace and security.

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