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Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's remarks on the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation on March 23, 2023

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Global Times: The US, the UK and Australia have recently unveiled details of their nuclear submarine cooperation plan. Australia is seeking to consult with the IAEA on safeguards arrangements. We understand that the Permanent Mission of China to the UN and other International Organizations in Vienna has sent a diplomatic note to the IAEA on the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation, stressing China's opposition to any consultation between the IAEA Secretariat and Australia on safeguards arrangements. Could you elaborate on China's position on the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation?

Wang Wenbin: AUKUS is a small bloc composed of Anglo-Saxon nations. It has been pressing ahead with nuclear submarine cooperation and coercing the IAEA into endorsing their plan. China has made clear its severe concern and firm opposition.

Let me stress that first, the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation exposes the three countries' double standard and hypocrisy on nuclear non-proliferation. The JCPOA capped Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium at 300 kilograms of uranium gas enriched to 3.67% purity. The AUKUS deal involves the transfer of tonnes of weapons-grade highly enriched uranium of over 90% purity from the US and the UK, both nuclear weapon states, to Australia, a non-nuclear weapon state. The nuclear proliferation risk here is only too obvious. This shows how the three countries use nuclear non-proliferation as a geopolitical tool. They have no scruples about proliferating nuclear material and technology to an ally, yet they castigate the others in the name of non-proliferation.

Second, the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation is a clear example of the three countries' hegemonic practice in defiance of international rules. They have pressed the IAEA to invoke Article 14 of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) to make safeguards arrangements, which is essentially coercing the IAEA Secretariat into making safeguards exemption arrangements, despite the huge divergences among the international community on the interpretation and applicability of this Article. Throughout the history of the IAEA, the formulation and improvement of all types of safeguards agreements were done through consultation of interested member states before being reviewed and adopted by the Board of Governors. The US, the UK, Australia and the IAEA Secretariat have no right to take the matter of applicability into their own hands, still less strike a deal between themselves and impose it on the entire membership.

Third, the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation seriously undermines the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. It will place large amounts of weapons-grade nuclear material in the hands of a country in a nuclear-weapon-free zone beyond the effective reach of the international safeguards system. This clearly contravenes the object and purpose of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation will set an egregious precedent and encourage others to follow suit. It will have a negative impact on the resolution of regional nuclear hotspot issues and may eventually lead to the collapse of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and backfire on the three countries themselves.

We urge the US, the UK and Australia to earnestly fulfill their international obligations, change course, and not unlock Pandora's box on nuclear proliferation. We call on the IAEA to live up to its non-proliferation responsibilities and refrain from endorsing the three countries' acts of nuclear proliferation. At the same time, we hope all member states of the IAEA will actively move forward the intergovernmental process and seek a way to resolve the safeguards issue with regard to the AUKUS cooperation. We need to join hands to firmly defend the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and safeguard global peace and security.

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