



Phobias, Manias, and Addictions



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Recommended Citation

"Phobias, Manias, and Addictions", NAPSNet Policy Forum, June 06, 2012,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/phobias-manias-and-addictions/>

Nautilus Peace and Security Weekly Report—Contributor's blog entry for Energy Security.

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Frank von Hippel says of the Japanese continuing production of plutonium – in addition to the 35 tons stored around the world – for possible use in a “next-generation” fuel in power reactors, “It's crazy...There is absolutely no reason to do that.”

Perhaps not. The faith in plutonium goes back to the roots of nuclear power – not just the first use to which Japan was subjected to, but also the dream of perpetual power, of the breeder reactors. In fact, the very first grid electricity from nuclear fuel was produced in an experimental breeder reactor and even though most countries have given up on the breeder technology, some after wasting billions of dollars, some still continue – in particular, India.

How ironic that Japan should press on with the nuclear dream while Germany, the original villain against whom the US had considered using nuclear power, has given up. Even more ironic that the country that suffered and hence foreswore the pursuit of nuclear weapons should actively promote its nuclear wares to the first openly defiant weapons proliferator – again, India.

The mania of the nuclear establishment leads it to charge the dissenters with phobia.

The Government of India has deployed psychiatrists to cure the Koodankulam nuclear protestors of phobia and instill an understanding of the virtues of nuclear power, such as putting their lives and livelihoods at risk for the sake of alleviating the power shortages. This, as Bidwai points out, after charging 6,800 people with “sedition” and “waging war against the State.”

The pursuit of nuclear power – with its long construction times and pathetic performance once built – has quite possibly been the most significant contributor to persistent power shortages. The obvious de facto policy of the Indian government is keeping more than 300 million people in total darkness, and another 500 million without reliable power, even in the 21st Century.

Even as the purveyors of the plutonium pipedreams sit around the table to figure out how to keep an NPT signatory from going nuclear and keeping an NPT non-signatory from attacking the former, they are lining up with sales and financing offers for some of the old customers and many new ones. Is this any different from the business of illicit drugs? Where will this addiction lead?

Whatever the technology – continually improving, so continuously doubtful – the relatively satisfactory Western nuclear operating record to date (for the most part) is a tribute to the integrity and capability of its institutions, despite whatever flaws and mistakes. Those institutions cannot be imported, nor can be indigenously grown overnight, especially in cultures given to unquestionably following the orders, treating scientists as infallible gods, and taking the authorities at their word that nuclear power is a symbol of technological progress and nuclear weapons that of crushing power over the enemies.

De-legitimizing nuclear weaponry and subjecting all nuclear power programs to a multi-lateral regime of safety, security, economic prudence and emergency risk management is the only sane option to keep the nuclear power option “open” for a Third Nuclear Era. To borrow from a report on climate change a few years ago, the challenge is “Managing the unavoidable, avoiding the unmanageable.”

—[Nikhil Desai](#), NAPSNet Contributor

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