

IAEA Physical Protection Meeting Stalls

- [Arms Control Today](#)

Alex Wagner

Despite heightened concern since September 11 over the possibility of a terrorist attack on any of the world's nuclear installations, a four-day International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting in Vienna to expand an international treaty on protecting nuclear material adjourned without agreement December 7.

The 1980 Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material obligates its 69 member states to implement specific measures to protect civilian nuclear material during international transport. With U.S. support, the IAEA has been seeking since 1997 to draft an amendment to the convention that would extend the treaty's reach to domestic nuclear protection.

In May, an IAEA group of experts tackled the issue, determining that the agency should draft an amendment that would expand the convention's scope by requiring member states to pass legislation implementing IAEA guidelines on a range of issues, including how nuclear materials are used, stored, and transported and how nuclear materials and facilities can be protected from sabotage. The group recommended the amendment should also address the confidentiality of information on how facilities are protected and member states' responsibilities for implementation.

Attended by 43 delegations and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), the December meeting sought to draft the amendment, taking into account the expert group's recommendations. According to the IAEA, the conference "achieved a complete and detailed review of the scope of the potential amendments." However, it was unable to conclude a draft amendment. Although a start has been made, there remain "many issues still to be resolved," IAEA spokesman David Kyd said.

It appears that some EURATOM states—including Belgium and, to a lesser degree, France and the United Kingdom—are reluctant to amend the convention, according to an expert familiar with the negotiations. George Bunn, a former U.S. negotiator of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, suggested that this resistance stems from EURATOM's historically antagonistic relationship with the IAEA and concern that states would be required to implement unnecessarily stringent safety and security measures at a heavy financial price. However, Bunn believes that EURATOM will "likely come on board, eventually."

Bunn also noted that, in the past, Russia and China have not been enthusiastic about amending the convention but were willing to hide behind EURATOM's opposition.

But a European official disagreed that particular EURATOM states were blocking the process. "France, Belgium, and the U.K. actively and constructively participated" in the December meeting and even elected a French chairperson, the official said, adding, "Belgium tabled a specific text for the amended convention, while the U.K. delegation made it very clear that it is also in favor of a revision."

Kyd emphasized that IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei is "eager" for the delegates to complete the amendment's drafting so that a formal conference to amend the convention could be convened this summer. However, Kyd cautioned "whether this timetable can be met is unclear."

Approval by a majority of the convention's states-parties is required to convene the conference.

IAEA Physical Protection Meeting Stalls

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

Adoption of an amendment requires approval by two-thirds of states-parties present. Once approved, the amendment would enter into force for each country upon its ratification. The delegates agreed to reconvene March 11-15.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-01/press-releases/iaea-physical-protection-meeting-stalls>