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Russia Touts Arctic Floating Nuclear Plant's Safety Despite 'Chernobyl on Ice' Concerns

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Lev Fedoseyev / TASS

Russia is preparing to send its first floating nuclear plant on a 5,000-kilometer journey to provide electricity to a remote resource-rich region, drawing comparisons to past nuclear disasters and concerns over plans to sell the technology to other countries.

As a changing climate accelerates Arctic ice melt, Russia has worked to capitalize on newly opened trade routes and establish a strong military presence in the region, expanding its range of nuclear icebreakers, submarines and other technologies. Greenpeace has called the Rosatom state nuclear company's floating plant, the Akademik Lomonosov, the "nuclear Titanic" and the "floating Chernobyl."

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The Akademik Lomonosov will be towed from northwest Russia to the country's Arctic Far East 86 kilometers off the coast of Alaska this month before starting operations next year.

Environmentalists and observers have outlined several scenarios in which the "floating Chernobyl" could be compromised as Russia trumpets the vessel's safety, according to British reporters invited onboard the Akademik Lomonosov.

"We... boated up to it to show that if we can boat up to it, terrorists can boat up to it," Greenpeace activist Konstantin Fomin told The Daily Telegraph in comments published Sunday.

"That object can't be completely airtight," said Andrei Zolotkov, a 35-year veteran of Russia's Rosatomflot nuclear-powered icebreaker company and current member of the Bellona Foundation, a Norwegian NGO that works on Arctic nuclear waste issues.

The Akademik Lomonosov's reactor can be shut down in the event of an accident, but storing spent fuel "on something like an unpowered vessel is wild to me," The Daily Telegraph quoted Zolotkov as saying.

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"Our real concern is... they want to sell this technology to countries like Sudan," Anna Kireyeva of the Bellona Foundation told The Guardian. "What will [those countries] do with spent nuclear fuel? How will they react in case of emergencies?"

The plant's operators, meanwhile, argue that the Akademik Lomonosov is protected against overheating, tsunamis and intrusion.

Comparing the floating nuclear plant to "a 'Chernobyl on ice' is just night and day," Vladimir Irminku, the Akademik Lomonosov's chief engineer, told The Guardian.

The plant, set to be based in the northernmost town of Pevek, will replace a coal-fired power plant and an aging nuclear power plant supplying more than 50,000 people with electricity in the Chukotka autonomous district. Construction costs of the Akademik Lomonosov are unknown, although media reports have estimated the price tag at around $450 million.

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