The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

U.S. and Russia Must Cooperate to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism

By Josh Cohen

March 31, 2016



A recent report from NATO asks a frightening question "Could the Islamic State go nuclear"? It's not an idle question, as U.S. President Barack Obama described nuclear terrorism as "the single biggest threat to U.S. security."

To address this risk, the U.S. is hosting a major nuclear security summit from March 31 to April 1 in Washington, D.C. There is one major shortcoming with the summit though: Russia — one of the world's two dominant nuclear powers — plans to boycott it. This decision represents the collapse of the once-thriving nuclear security cooperation between Washington and Moscow — one which both sides bear responsibility for.

In the early 1990s Washington discovered that poverty and chaos caused frightening security defects throughout the vast Russian nuclear complex. Unpaid guards at nuclear sites were frequently absent. Insiders at Russian nuclear weapons plants tried to steal and sell nuclear materials on the black market. A senior White House science adviser even discovered enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for several nuclear bombs sitting unguarded in a Moscow

Institute.

The U.S. countered this threat by spending billions of dollars under the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program helping Russia secure its nuclear materials and facilities. From the building of a massive storage facility for 25,000 kilograms of fissile materials in Chelyabinsk, Russia to the transfer of 58,000 former Soviet nuclear weapon scientists to civilian programs, CTR was arguably the most successful American foreign aid program since the Marshall Plan.

Following the conclusion of the CTR program, in September 2013 the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and Russia's state-owned nuclear company Rosatom signed a comprehensive nuclear cooperation agreement. This agreement provided for projects in areas ranging from nuclear non-proliferation and the peaceful international use of nuclear power to extensive access for scientists to each side's most sensitive facilities and nuclear laboratories — a critical trust-building initiative.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea however, DOE banned Russian scientists from visiting any of its nuclear labs while simultaneously banning U.S. scientists from visiting Russia. The 2015 budget also banned most funding for nuclear nonproliferation activities and assistance in Russia and remains in effect.

Russia then retaliated by announcing it would no longer accept American aid to secure its weapons-grade nuclear materials. As a result, such work as joint security projects at 18 civilian facilities housing weapons material to security upgrades at Russia's seven nuclear "closed cities" were cancelled. Bi-lateral Russian-American nuclear security cooperation is now dead.

As a recent study from the Project on Managing the Atom at Harvard notes, Russian has made great progress in improving its nuclear security over the last 20 years. The physical security around its facilities are largely modernized; Russian nuclear personnel are paid on time; new nuclear safety regulations exist; and the vast number of Russian nuclear sites have been trimmed.

Nevertheless, real problems remain. For example, no requirement exists for Russian nuclear facilities to compare the amount of nuclear materials produced with the materials currently in existence to ensure the numbers match up. Indeed, some facilities possess thousands of canisters of HEU or plutonium with paper records going back decades, but no one has ever went back to measure each canister to be sure the material is still there.

Insider threats due to Russia's endemic corruption continue to exist as well. The director of one of Russia's largest plutonium and HEU processing facilities and two of his deputies were arrested or corruption in a multi-million scheme, while a Russian general in command of a nuclear weapon storage site was fired due to massive corruption. A colonel in the Russian Interior Ministry in charge of nuclear security inspections was also arrested for soliciting bribes to overlook security violations.

Most recently, an Associated Press investigation reported four separate incidents where Moldovan police broke up smuggling attempts involving nuclear materials linked to Russian organized crime — one of which involved an attempt by a Russian gang to sell nuclear material to the Islamic State. Furthermore, forensic analysis revealed the materials seized

were produced in the early 1990s in a Russian nuclear facility in the Ural Mountains. This raises a frightening question: What else has gone missing from Russian nuclear facilities since the break-up of the Soviet Union that we are unaware of?

The extremist connection is noteworthy. Osama bin Laden considered nuclear terrorism targeting American civilians to be a legitimate action, and the Islamic State has seized enough nuclear materials from research centers, hospitals and an oil facility in Iraq to construct a dirty bomb. Recent reports indicate that Islamic extremism has spread to the Urals, where a number of Russian nuclear facilities are located. With President Vladimir Putin acknowledging that at least 5,000-7,000 people from Russia and other former Soviet states joined the Islamic State, it's not impossible to imagine Islamic State sympathizers getting their hands on Russian nuclear materials.

To limit the threat of nuclear terrorism, the U.S. must take three steps to jumpstart U.S.-Russian nuclear security cooperation. While the U.S. should keep its Russian sanctions in place until Russia withdraws its troops from Ukraine and implements the Minsk Agreement, American national interests require that we separate nuclear security and the crisis in Ukraine.

First, DOE should propose to its counterparts within Rosatom that the September 2013 agreement between the two sides be reactivated, resuming the extensive scientist-to-scientist collaboration envisioned in the original agreement.

While this would require a U.S. "climb down" from its April freeze of the DOE-Rosatom agreement, as former Los Alamos director Siegfried Hecker noted, nuclear security ultimately depends on personal relationships between Russian and American scientists.

A two year information gap about Russian nuclear security now exists. With sanctions and collapsing oil prices squeezing Russian government budgets, analysts now question Russia's ability to maintain security systems previously funded by the U.S. in the 1990s and 2000s. Given that a 2013 Department of Defense report to Congress noted that the "issue of how to sustain nuclear security upgrades at Russian nuclear sites has not yet been resolved" these concerns are legitimate.

Second, the U.S. should understand that the narrative from the 1990s whereby the U.S. is a donor and Russia is an aid recipient is no longer acceptable in Moscow. U.S. Russian nuclear cooperation must therefore be reframed as a partnership of equals, with both sides contributing to the conversation. Some ways to do this include:

• Workshops on best practices in fissile materials accounting;

• Comprehensive site visits to each side's key laboratories and enrichment sites to compare security strategies;

• Joint work in other countries — Moscow, for example, is a key partner in removing HEU from Russian-supplied reactors in third countries. This might also involve joint U.S.-Russian technical assistance projects to assist other countries to improve their nuclear security;

• Mutual vulnerability assessments with each side providing critical reviews to the other;

• Establish a joint intelligence task force on centered around preventing nuclear smuggling and terrorism.

These activities require providing the Russians greater access to American nuclear facilities, but with the reciprocal benefit that American experts would gain access to Russian facilities.

Third, the Obama administration demand Congress fully fund U.S.-Russian nuclear security cooperation. The administration is proposing to spend $348 billion upgrading the U.S. nuclear arsenal over the next ten years — isn't it worth it spending a tiny fraction of that money to prevent nuclear terrorism? While Russia hawks may wonder why the U.S. would spend money to assist an adversary, Washington does not help Russia as a favor to Moscow, but because preventing nuclear terrorism remains a core American national security interest.

All of these steps have one thing in common: they require that we delink nuclear security cooperation with Moscow from U.S.-Russian geopolitical tensions. The consequences from nuclear terrorism are so dire that to do otherwise is foolhardy.

Josh Cohen is a former USAID project officer involved in managing economic reform projects in the former Soviet Union. He contributes to a number of foreign policy-focused media outlets and tweets at @jkc_in_dc

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/03/31/us-and-russia-must-cooperate-to-prevent-nuclear-terrorism-a52348