

Extend the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program

Written by Reshmi Kazi

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RESHMI KAZI, JAN 23 2013

The Russian government's refusal to renew the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR) has put the 21-year-old bilateral agreement into jeopardy. The nuclear weapons security pact has played a significant role for over two decades, providing funding and expertise in collaboration with partner governments to secure and eliminate nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons arsenals following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Cooperative Threat Reduction Program was established in 1991 and has since made remarkable progress in getting rid of weapons and other materials in the states of Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. In the backdrop of the Cold War, when no one imagined cooperation between the rivals – United States and Russia, the Nunn-Lugar agreement made pioneering achievements in deactivating 7,619 strategic nuclear warheads from deployment, eliminating 902 intercontinental ballistic missiles, dismantling 33 nuclear submarines capable of launching ballistic missiles, destroying 2,936 metric tons of chemical weapons in Russia and Albania, enhancing 24 nuclear weapons storage sites, ensuring safe transportation of nuclear materials and weapons, equipping 39 biological threat monitoring stations and extending support to over 5000 nuclear, chemical, biological and missile scientists to conduct peaceful research. However, with the Cold War long over and having already achieved remarkable progress in nuclear security, has the Nunn-Lugar program outlived its utility?

At present, Russia and the United States control approximately 90 to 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons. Hence, close cooperation between the once Cold War rivals is pivotal to combat the spread and use of nuclear weapons in the world. The two powers have a special responsibility to set a precedent for effecting substantial joint international efforts to strengthen global nuclear security. With this backdrop, the Kremlin's decision to back off from the nuclear security pact has put the international security value of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program in peril. Undoubtedly, it comes as a major setback to the world's non-proliferation regime.

In October 2012, the Russian Foreign Ministry officially stated that the current program, which is critical for future cooperation between Washington and the Kremlin, "is at odds with our ideas about the forms and basis for building further cooperation in that area. To this end, we need a more modern legal framework." It is believed that Russia is no longer interested in portraying itself as a nation that receives foreign [US] assistance for securing its nuclear arsenal. The Kremlin opines that in the post-Cold War era, cash strapped Russia faced the acute danger of nuclear weapons, materials and sensitive information falling into the wrong hands. Hence, it seemed only wise that Moscow entered into nuclear cooperation with Washington for securing its nuclear arsenal. However, two decades later, Russia wants to shrug off that dependency. Russian officials are aware of their improved financial position since the days of the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and the Foreign Ministry has stated that the Government has increased its budget allocation "in the field of disarmament." Besides, the Russian officials apprehend that the security pact might end, revealing sensitive information about their strategic assets to the United States. So, does this mean the Nunn-Lugar Program, which expires in July 2013, has no prospects of survival?

The answer perhaps lies in a deeper understanding of the reasons for Moscow's disinterest in continuing the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and the reasons for the Russian objections. According to the Russian government, the renewed nuclear security pact is based on the original 1991 agreement, which is no longer

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“satisfying” to the Kremlin “especially considering new realities.” The *RIA Novosti* quoted unidentified Russian Foreign Ministry insiders as saying the present agreement is “thoroughly discriminating” and added that a fresh accord has to be premised on “the principles of equality and mutual respect.”

Though Russia has not suggested any specific changes, one can assume a few things which can be potential game changers for a new security agreement between Washington and Moscow. To begin with, the liability issue is prickly between the former Cold War rivals. During the entire span of the Nunn-Lugar Program, the U.S. allocated Russia more than \$7 billion for funding, providing adequate equipment and expertise for securing, safeguarding and finally dismantling Cold War era nuclear weapons. However, over two decades, the U.S. government and its contractors indemnified themselves virtually from all liabilities arising out of any accident, damages or deaths that might have occurred while executing any CTR related work within Russia. The inability of the U.S. and Russia to negotiate a mutually acceptable liability agreement led to the dissolution of the Nuclear Cities Initiative in October 2003. The Nuclear Cities Initiative had played a cardinal role in assisting scientists and engineers from the closed nuclear cities in the former Soviet Union in acquiring non-military work. Resolution of the liability issue would be an important step toward facilitating renewal of the CTR program.

Another contentious issue that can potentially put the threat reduction program back on track is the issue of inspections. Currently, the U.S. possesses the right to inspect all material and equipment it has imparted to Russia. This may not continue to be acceptable to the financially sound Russia of today. The Russian leaders consider the U.S. “verification measures as too intrusive.” Hence, a more balanced inspections system, which does not raise apprehensions within the Russian quarters of a possible invasion into their sensitive nuclear information, would increase the prospects for putting the CTR program back on track.

On the political side, a possible change by the United States on the issue of ballistic missile defence (BMD) would prove to be a significant incentive for Russia to reconsider renewing the nuclear security pact. The Russians perceive the U.S. BMD system to be a threat to its national security interests. The Russians argue that verbal assurances from the White House are not an adequate guarantee that the sophisticated missile defence system will not be targeted against Russia’s defence capability. Washington’s refusal to agree to a documented treaty with the Kremlin, imposing restrictions on its BMD system, is regarded by the Russian leaders as leaving the door open for the U.S. to use its missile defence system against Moscow in the future. Under these circumstances, coupled with the emergence of new nuclear states, Russia finds it unwise to affirmatively respond to any international calls for further disarmament. The U.S. needs to assuage the Russian concerns over its missile defense deployment in Europe in order to further bilateral nuclear cooperation.

Despite the odds, it would not be in Russia’s interest to abrogate the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program outrightly. There is still enormous work to be done to secure loose nukes within Russia. Although the country has made substantial progress under the Nunn-Lugar program, it still remains one of the least safe countries in terms of its nuclear security. The NTI Nuclear Materials Security Index, compiled in collaboration with the Economic Intelligence Unit, ranked Russia 24th out of 32 countries that possess more than 1 kilogram of radioactive materials. At present, Russia possesses the world’s largest nuclear stockpile of fissile materials and nuclear weapons. Russia also faces the challenge of safeguarding their nuclear waste.

Though there has been an economic resurgence in Russia, and Moscow could assure the security of its own nuclear arsenal, experts are concerned that Russian leaders will prioritise the production of new weapons and the building of defenses against the U.S. BMD system over an expansion of their nuclear security programs. Military spending is one of the largest spending categories in Russia’s federal budget. In 2012 the government expenditure is expected to reach 12.7 trillion rubles, which means that the rearmament programme will account for about 15 percent of the government spending. Compounding the problem further are the issues of prevailing high corruption and bureaucratic red-tapism in the country. These are worrisome indicators, and the international community recognises this.

Critics may argue that the CTR Program is not a panacea for ensuring nuclear security. Several nations with nuclear weapons like India and Pakistan are managing their nuclear arsenal without a CTR program. However, it is

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noteworthy that both the Asian nuclear powers do not possess the world's greatest nuclear stockpiles and, hence, do not have a special responsibility to set a precedent for close nuclear cooperation with the rest of the world. However, if the U.S. and Russia are successfully able to take the CTR program to the next step, it will be a precedent for nuclear capable states like India and Pakistan to develop similar bilateral nuclear agreement at the regional level within South Asia. Alternatively, failure of the world's largest nuclear weapons states to continue bilateral nuclear cooperation will send a scary signal to the world community and increase the global risk of nuclear terrorism. Much lies on the U.S. and Russia, to reset a precedent by putting aside their differences and continuing the Nunn-Lugar Program for a safe and secure world.

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Dr. Reshmi Kazi is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses, New Delhi. Her areas of research include nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament and nuclear security. Her monograph, titled Nuclear Terrorism: The Grand New Terror of the 21st Century, is a forthcoming publication.

About the author:

Dr. Reshmi Kazi is an Associate Fellow at the Nuclear and Arms Control Centre of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi. She is also a South Asia Visiting Fellow at the Stimson Center.