

# Why the U.S. Should Keep Cooperating with Russia on Nuclear Security

**Siegfried S. Hecker** and **Peter E. Davis**, Stanford University, August 2014

| U.S. FOREIGN POLICY |



“You have been brainwashed,” our Russian hosts lamented during dinner at their Moscow apartment in late April. We had asked them how they reconcile biased Russian news reports with evidence of Russian special operations forces in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. “What does Washington think it is doing by sending the CIA chief to Kiev to support those fascists?” they asked in response.

We were surprised that without exception every one of our Russian colleagues, nuclear scientists whom in some cases we have known for 25 years, defended Moscow's actions and criticized Washington and the West over Ukraine. Over after-dinner vodka, we agreed that we cannot reconcile our views of what is happening in Ukraine, so we returned to problems that require our continued attention, namely how to prevent nuclear proliferation and guard against nuclear terrorism. We agreed that we have made a lot of progress working together over the past 20-plus years, but that we are not done.

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The purpose of our visit was to finish work on a book we are jointly writing about how Russian and American nuclear scientists joined forces at the end of the Cold War to help deal with nuclear risks in Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union, which had resulted from post-Soviet chaos and the breakdown of nuclear order. One of the main objectives of the book is to rejuvenate nuclear cooperation, which Moscow has dramatically curtailed during the past decade after having fostered it during the first decade following the end of the Cold War. During the past few years, Moscow has sent an unambiguous message to Washington—namely, that the United States can shift its efforts at nuclear security cooperation to the rest of the world, but in Russia the work is done. The shift resulted from Moscow's increased confidence in its own nuclear security and its security services' determination to keep Americans out of Russia's nuclear facilities.

In contrast to Moscow's pronouncements, Russia's nuclear specialists recognize that continued cooperation is needed. Nuclear safety and nuclear security are never-ending jobs that require cooperation and sharing of best

practices. Russia's experts do not want to return to nuclear isolation because they believe it led to the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and to the nuclear security crisis following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Now, the crisis in Ukraine has not only put nuclear cooperation between the United States and Russia on the back burner, but Washington appears to be erecting its own roadblocks that threaten to irreparably damage such cooperation. The House Armed Services Committee recently approved legislation that would put nuclear security cooperation with Russia on hold. While the White House has opposed the Committee's efforts to limit cooperation, the Department of Energy has issued its own restrictions on scientific interchanges as part of the U.S. sanctions regime against Russia.

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It is clearly in Moscow and Washington's common interest to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and global nuclear terrorism. Keeping all nuclear materials in the control of governments and erecting effective barriers to nuclear trafficking requires cooperation. It is in their common interest to make further arms reductions, rather than return to the arms race era and nuclear testing. And, if nuclear power is to provide clean electricity in more places around the world, Russia and the United States must share a common goal of making sure this spread happens safely and without exacerbating proliferation concerns.

These are precisely the objectives the Obama administration had been promoting with Russia and around the world, although Moscow has become a reluctant partner. Now, Washington appears willing to sacrifice nuclear cooperation in the short term in order to sanction Russia for its actions in Ukraine. But Washington does not have to choose between the two. It should

be able to pressure Moscow on Ukraine, while still cooperating on nuclear issues.

Progress on the nuclear front requires good working relationships between Russian and American scientists. These relationships, already strongly opposed by Russia's security services, cannot be turned off and on at will. They must be nurtured and maintained over time to foster the cooperation needed to reduce the nuclear dangers. Relationships are difficult to rebuild once they have been cut off. In addition, curtailing cooperation now will threaten the gains that have been made over the past 20 years and jeopardize Washington's enormous investment in cooperative threat reduction.

We realize, however, that the nature of nuclear cooperation must change to reflect Russia's economic recovery and its political evolution over the past two decades. Future cooperative threat reduction programs must also reflect the return to adversarial governmental relations resulting from the Ukraine crisis. The programs must change from wide-ranging U.S.-funded and -led activities to more selective, jointly sponsored collaborations in the two countries' common interest.

A strong U.S. role in nuclear security cooperation remains imperative. In spite of Moscow's assertion to the contrary, its vast stockpile of nuclear materials remains vulnerable to theft or diversion. Whereas the physical security of nuclear facilities has improved greatly, both because of years of American support and the reemergence of Russia's overbearing security services, control and accounting of nuclear materials, which are crucial to combat insider threats, still fall far shy of international best practices. For example, Russia still has no baseline inventory of all nuclear materials the Soviet Union produced and where they are today. Moreover, it has shown no interest in trying to discover just how much material is unaccounted for. Our Russian colleagues voice concern that progress on nuclear security in their country will not be sustained once American cooperation is terminated. They believe that Russia's nuclear

security culture and the government's commitment to fund continued security upgrades are still very fragile and require continued cooperation.

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It is also in Washington's interest for Russia to cooperate on preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Iran is a good case in point. Much progress has been made toward a negotiated settlement of Iran's nuclear program since President Hassan Rouhani was elected in June 2013. However, little would have been possible without U.S.-Russia cooperation. It is not in Moscow's interest to have nuclear weapons spread to its near abroad. It needs Washington's continued global leadership in this area. Washington, in turn, needs Moscow, especially if it is to develop more effective measures to prevent proliferation as Russia and other nuclear vendors support nuclear power expansion around the globe.

Although cooperation related to the stewardship of Washington and Moscow's respective nuclear arsenals would be more difficult in an adversarial governmental relationship, there are numerous areas that would still benefit from collaboration. Scientific understanding of problems such as the aging of plutonium remains elusive and beyond the full reach of either country. One of the authors of this column has personally been involved in plutonium science collaboration with his Russian counterparts for the past 15 years. Continued cooperation in this area, as in some areas of nuclear weapon safety and security, remain in our common interest.

As the United States and the European Union take short-term measures to restrain Russia's actions in Ukraine, they should not sacrifice the hard-earned

gains made to stabilize the nuclear threats that arose after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Some forms of nuclear cooperation, especially on arms control and nonproliferation, were supported even during the darkest days of the Cold War, because the alternatives proved unacceptable to both sides. With the Cold War's end, nuclear cooperation flourished. Washington should foster continued cooperation to meet our shared challenges, rather than allowing it to be held hostage to the Ukrainian crisis. Over the past 20-plus years, along with our Russian colleagues, we have found that at times we must move beyond political disagreements such as the political situation in Ukraine, to work together to advance the cause of nuclear security.

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