Recommendations to Improve Security and Reduce Nuclear Risks Presented at Munich Security Conference

For the past three years, Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Igor Ivanov, Sam Nunn and their respective organizations—the European Leadership Network (ELN), the Munich Security Conference (MSC), the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI)—have been working with former and current officials and experts from a group of Euro-Atlantic states and the European Union to test ideas and develop proposals for improving security in areas of existential common interest. The Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group (EASLG) operates as an independent and informal initiative, with participants who reflect the diversity of the Euro-Atlantic region from the United States, Canada, Russia, and fifteen European countries.

U.S.-China mission rushes bomb-grade nuclear fuel out of Africa

Chinese and U.S. nuclear experts spent a decade plotting out the Ghana operation, sharing expertise and working at each other’s labs. “No question, we were able to collaborate very, very well on the MNSR conversion,” says Ernest Moniz, CEO of the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), a think tank in
Washington, D.C., and former secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). The process strengthened a bond that is quietly developing between nuclear scientists in the United States and China. “It’s very important for building trust,” says Hui Zhang, a nuclear policy analyst at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University.

Supporting Nuclear Non-Proliferation: Ghana Converts Research Reactor from HEU to LEU Fuel

Ghana has successfully completed the conversion of its only research reactor from the use of high enriched uranium (HEU) fuel to low enriched uranium (LEU) fuel, in an international project supported by the IAEA to help decrease the proliferation risks associated with HEU fuel.

Debating United States IAEA’s Nuclear Security Support

In recent discussions of the United States President Donald Trump’s proposed budget cuts for the United Nations and affiliated agencies, a controversial issue has been whether the cut will reduce or end direct funding to the International
Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a U.N.–nuclear watchdog the United States helped create in 1957. The Agency’s aim is to promote the peaceful use of nuclear technology and to ensure its member nations do not turn their atomic activities to weapons development. On the one hand, the White House argues that IAEA missions do not substantially advance U.S. foreign policy interests, are duplicative, or are not well-managed. From this perspective, proponents of the cut may have a point if the IAEA assessed contribution, voluntary contribution, gift of services, equipment and use of facilities toward the Agency’s nuclear security activities were costing the US billions of dollars every year and came at the expense of maintaining a modern military, keeping US air and water clean, taking care of US veterans.

Rather, reports by national governments and experts on nuclear security developments during the oft-cited President Obama’s Nuclear Security Summit era confirm that the U.S. leadership and contribution to the IAEA improved national capacities to implement nuclear security objectives. The objectives enhance the United States “vital interest” in deterring nuclear proliferation and securing vulnerable nuclear and radioactive substances from falling into the hands of terrorists who could use it to create an improvised nuclear device or “dirty bomb.”

The threat of a terrorist attack involving nuclear or radioactive material worldwide is real. The global nuclear energy sector today, for instance, comprises of some 444 operating nuclear power reactors. As terrorist seek to acquire enriched materials and radioactive waste to build weapons, each vulnerable reactor could be a potential target. Securing nuclear and radioactive systems and combatting nuclear proliferation in an age of expanding nuclear power use are good enough reasons for states to provide resources that the IAEA needs to handle its current responsibilities. In sum, then, the issue boils down to why Congress believes the IAEA’s nuclear security activities contribute to advancing the
national security interests of the United States by building a more secure and prosperous world?

Steep bipartisan opposition

On the other hand, however, critics of the President’s proposal reject the cuts arguing that the move lacks foresight and puts US at risk in the areas of nuclear and radiological terrorism. Therefore, the cut should be rejected by even the Congress that is noted for cutting budgets. It is likely that Congress will not consent to the entire proposed reduction because Congress members from both parties have spoken out against slashing funding to the UN and agencies. Even before the budget was released, a leader in cutting spending Republican Senator Lindsey Graham from South Carolina declared it “dead on arrival.” Such an extreme statement by Graham who has earned a reputation as a conservative problem-solver and one of the strongest proponents of a robust national defense signals a bipartisan steep opposition to the budget.

On April 6, Democratic Congressman Bill Foster from Illinois State and who serves on the House Committee on Financial Services introduced a bipartisan resolution (H.Res.260) expressing the sense of the House of Representatives in support of the Agency’s nuclear security role. This resolution was assigned to the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee same date, which will consider it before possibly sending it on to the House or Senate as a whole. Co-sponsored by both parties’ members of the House of Representatives – Jeff Fortenberry, a Republican from Nebraska, and Pete Visclosky, a Democrat from Indiana. If passed, the resolution would prod the United States and other likeminded nations to step up support for the nuclear security activities of the Agency.

On April 26, a press release on Congressman Foster’s website announced a bipartisan resolution on IAEA. The House resolution, which support IAEA’s nuclear security efforts, is
in line with the action plan of the fourth and final Nuclear Security summit in 2016, which noted the requirement for “reliable and sufficient resources” for the IAEA. In the words of Congressman Foster, sponsor of the resolution and critic of Trump’s proposed budget cut to the UN and agencies acknowledges the IAEA’s “indispensable role” in promoting worldwide nuclear security and safety “I am proud to join my colleagues in this bipartisan initiative to prevent nuclear proliferation. Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, we must actively find ways to reduce the spread of nuclear weapons and materials. By allowing member states to work together, the IAEA plays a critical role in the reduction and security of these weapons to make the world safe for everyone.” One implication of Congressman Foster’s urge is that funding the Agency is a national obligation and one of the critical investments of the State Department.

In the announcement, Congressman Foster was joined by Representatives Jeff Fortenberry, Republican from Nebraska, and Pete Visclosky, Democrat from Indiana. Congressman Visclosky is a member of the House Appropriations Committee and serves as the Ranking Member on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. Congressman Fortenberry serves as co-chair of the Nuclear Security Working Group and is a member of the House Appropriations Committee, which is responsible for the expenditures of the United States government.

In Fortenberry’s view, “The IAEA plays an indispensable role in protecting the world from the unthinkable.” Moreover, he reminds us that “The nightmare possibility of nuclear accidents, or use of nuclear weaponry, will plague mankind unless we have robust commitment to standards and verification of the type provided by the IAEA.” Basically, Fortenberry is saying that US funding is vital to ensure the IAEA can handle its current responsibilities by having the tools, people, skills, and resources needed to do its job.

Visclosky corroborates his colleagues’ views when he says,
“The International Atomic Energy Agency plays a vital role in preventing nuclear proliferation, enhancing nuclear security, and facilitating worldwide access to peaceful applications of nuclear technology”. In fact, he admires Foster’s effort when he adds, “As a Co-Chair of the Congressional Nuclear Security Working Group, I appreciate the initiative of Rep. Bill Foster to bring awareness to the benefits that the U.S. derives from the IAEA, and I am pleased to cosponsor his legislation.” The essence of Visclosky’s argument is that US support to the IAEA, the world’s centre for cooperation in the nuclear field, is a critical element to expanding the great opportunities that peaceful applications of atomic energy could offer for economic and social development in developing countries through extensive and concerted international efforts.

According to this view, US funding is vital to ensures that the IAEA can handle its current responsibilities by having the tools, people, skills, and resources needed to do its job – which is, to put it bluntly, to help keep us and other countries safe and enable all to benefit from the peaceful benefits of nuclear technology. In sum, then, the issue is whether or Congress should approve President Trump’s proposed budget cut to the UN and affiliated agencies, including the IAEA? And how would this help to advance the national security interests of the United States by building a more secure and prosperous world?

Ramifications

My own view is that the U.S. investment in the IAEA is crucial to the survivability of the agency in promoting a strong and sustainable global nuclear safety and security framework in Member States. The United States is the largest contributor to the IAEA, providing an estimated $200 million annually – about half in dues and another half in voluntary contributions. The assessed rate of U.S. contributions is typically about 25% of the regular IAEA budget, followed by Japan with a share of 10.6%. Member States assessed and voluntary contributions are
used in fulfilling the Agency’s mandate to “accelerate and enlarge the contribution of atomic energy to peace, health, and prosperity throughout the world.” The Agency uses various mechanisms to fulfil its mandate.

The technical cooperation programme is the IAEA’s main mechanism for transferring nuclear technology to Member States. It assists them in establishing and strengthening capacities for the safe, peaceful and secure use of nuclear technology for sustainable socioeconomic development, working in partnership with key actors to increase impact. In Africa, the IAEA provides technical cooperation support to 45 countries. The support includes national and regional projects in such fields as food and agriculture; health and nutrition; nuclear knowledge development and management; safety; water and the environment; energy and industrial applications and radiation technology.

The Agency’s regional technical cooperation programme in Africa comprises projects under the African Regional Cooperative Agreement for Research, Development and Training related to Nuclear Science and Technology (AFRA), as well as regional projects outside this framework. It aims to foster strong regional cooperation by promoting the region’s sustainability and self-reliance through collaboration with existing regional centres. Its objective is to strengthen human resource development, to further improve the existing infrastructure and to foster technical cooperation among countries in Africa through the exchange of knowledge, expertise and analytical services.

Though I concede that President Trump campaigned to “Make America Great Again” that would entail a refocused-on priority strategic objectives and placing renewed attention on the appropriate U.S. share of international spending, I still maintain that without the IAEA providing its mandated service, nuclear commerce and the peaceful benefits of nuclear power would come to a crashing halt, and cheaters could create
wzapy weapons programs unchecked and likely undetected. Simply put, the United States has a long-standing and continuing interest in preventing countries and terrorists from building nuclear weapons.

For example, the IAEA develops and promotes guidelines for how to protect the materials terror groups need if they intend to go nuclear – and it sends expert teams when asked to judge how well those guidelines are being implemented. Last year, it conducted seven so-called International Physical Protection Advisory Service (IPPAS) missions, and 11 countries have requested IPPAS missions for the coming year. The IAEA maintains the global database for information about lost and stolen nuclear materials, which could make their way to terrorists. Last year, over 180 incidents were reported to the IAEA, 14 of which involved theft of nuclear material or radiological sources that were then offered for sale. Many of these incidents would not otherwise be known to the United States. Although some might object that U.S. resources are not unlimited and somebody else will have to pick up the slack, I would reply that 52 Head of States and four international organizations including the UN, EU, INTERPOL and IAEA at the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC, confirmed that “The threat of nuclear and radiological terrorism remains one of the greatest challenges to international security, and the threat is constantly evolving.”

Summary

The issue is important because the voluntary contributions, gift of services, equipment and use of facilities toward the Agency’s nuclear security activities form a necessary element in the resources package that the Agency needs to operate effectively and efficiently. The bipartisan resolution urges US congress members to encourage IAEA member nations, including the United States, to provide sufficient resources so the IAEA can carry out its missions, including: support for
ongoing ministerial meetings on nuclear security; providing “reliable and sufficient resources” to the IAEA Nuclear Security Plan; delivering “appropriate political, technical, and financial support” for the Agency’s Nuclear Security Fund; and establishing a full plan for promoting private-sector contributions to the fund.

Why America Should Keep Supporting the IAEA

U.S. leaders from both sides of the aisle have consistently supported global efforts to prevent terrorists from stealing, transporting or using nuclear materials to wreak destruction and panic. Much of this work is accomplished through direct cooperation among the United States and other countries who wish to secure nuclear materials, improve nuclear detection, beef up nuclear forensics, or eliminate nuclear materials they no longer use. But this cannot and should not be something the United States does alone.