US Nonproliferation Cooperation with Russia and China:

A Call for Finding Common Ground with Great Power Rivals

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Introduction

The United States has at times worked cooperatively with Russia and China to promote shared nonproliferation objectives. But with no end in sight to the current precipitous decline in Washington's bilateral relations with Moscow and Beijing, constructive engagement on today's nonproliferation challenges has become increasingly problematic. Unless the United States and its two great power competitors can find a way to carve out areas of cooperation in otherwise highly adversarial relationships, the remarkably positive record of international efforts to prevent additional countries from acquiring weapons will be difficult to sustain.*

* This article expands upon an article to be published in the November 2020 issue of *Arms Control Today* (www.armscontrol.org/today).

Previous Nonproliferation Cooperation

Presidents Jiang Zemin and Bill Clinton on September 11, 1999. US government photo taken by David Scull.

Despite periods of intense bilateral rivalry, the United States often managed to find common ground with the Soviet Union and later Russia and China on the prevention of nuclear proliferation. At the height of the Cold War, the United States and the USSR recognized that the instabilities and dangers associated with the emergence of additional nuclear weapon states could jeopardize their national interests, not least because it could create new power centers and undercut their own dominant positions in world affairs (and, for Moscow, raise the specter of a nuclear-armed Germany). As documented by Sarah Bidgood and Bill Potter, this shared interest led to close collaboration in addressing proliferation threats, including in drafting the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), establishing the London Group (later the Nuclear Suppliers Group) of nuclear exporters, and discouraging a South African nuclear weapons test.[1]

Later, US–Russian cooperation was critical in encouraging Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to give up their Soviet-era nuclear weapons and join the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states; ensuring through Nunn-Lugar cooperative threat reductions programs that inadequately secured Russian nuclear materials and facilities in the wake of the USSR's collapse would not spread to bad actors; repatriating to Russia weapons-grade uranium previously used to fuel Soviet-supplied research reactors in other countries; and persuading Iran to accept strict limits on its nuclear programs in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

[1] William C. Potter and Sarah Bidgood, eds., *Once and Future Partners: the US, Russia, and Nuclear Non-proliferation* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2018), https://www.nonproliferation.org/once-and-future-partners-the-us-russia-and-nuclear-non-proliferation/

China was a latecomer to nonproliferation. In the early years under Mao Zedong, China publicly advocated the spread of nuclear weapons to "break the hegemony of the superpowers."[2] But, by the early 1990s, it had come to see considerable value in adhering to nonproliferation norms: promoting the more stable international environment needed for its development, maintaining the non-nuclear status of Japan and other Asian neighbors, bolstering its credentials as a responsible permanent member of the UN Security Council, and building better relations with the United States. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, it joined the NPT and other instruments of the global nonproliferation regime.

Throughout the 1990s, frequent US–Chinese engagement on nonproliferation—sometimes involving the threat or imposition of US sanctions against Chinese entities for their role in irresponsible nuclear-related exports—was instrumental in encouraging Beijing to put in place its national export control system and to cease proliferation-sensitive technology transfers, including any nuclear cooperation with Iran (which China agreed to forgo in exchange for a Clinton administration decision to authorize the US sale of nuclear reactors to China).

Washington and Beijing often worked together closely to stop North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. As host and chair of the Six Party Talks in the 2000s, China played an active role in pressing Pyongyang to halt and eliminate its destabilizing strategic capabilities. In subsequent years, China made frequent—but often futile—efforts at the highest levels to dissuade the North Koreans from proceeding with nuclear and missile tests and to encourage them to accept negotiated limitations. And while China was much less central on Iran than on North Korea, it was a supportive member of the P5+1 negotiating team and made major reductions in its purchase of Iranian crude oil in compliance with US sanctions, which was a critical factor inducing Tehran to accept strict limits on its nuclear program in the JCPOA.

[2] Testimony of the Honorable John D. Holum, Acting Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs before the Senate Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services, July 18, 1998, https://cryptome.org/jya/dos061898.htm

From Sometimes Partners to Frequent Foes

So, from time to time, the United States has been able to find common ground with Russia and China in addressing proliferation challenges. But in recent years, and especially with the sharp downturn in bilateral relations, Moscow and Beijing have increasingly acted less as Washington's nonproliferation partners and more as its nonproliferation opponents.

Iran

This shift has been especially pronounced on Iran, with cooperation as P5+1 colleagues during the JCPOA negotiations giving way to strong differences. To a significant extent, America's European allies have shared Russia's and China's opposition to Washington's Iran policies since 2018. Thus, the P5+1 countries minus the United States—China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom—have all been deeply disturbed by the Donald J. Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, re-imposition and expansion of US sanctions, far-reaching and uncompromising negotiating demands, and decision to seek a snap-back of all previous UN sanctions. But Russian and Chinese divergence from US policies has gone well beyond that of the Europeans.

Moscow and Beijing have aligned themselves closely with Iran and become its principal defenders on most contentious issues. They hold Washington solely responsible for the current precarious state of affairs, suggesting that Iran is justified in shedding its JCPOA nuclear restrictions in response to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and its maximum pressure campaign. Unlike the Europeans, Russia and China do not criticize Tehran's regional behavior (and indeed Russia has been Iran's main partner in shoring up the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria). They support Iran's questionable position that Security Council restrictions associated with the JCPOA do not apply to its ballistic missile activities. Despite Iran's early 2020 stonewalling of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requests for access to sites where evidence suggests that illicit nuclear activities may have taken place in the past, they cast the only negative votes on a relatively mild IAEA Board of Governors resolution in June calling for Tehran's cooperation with the Agency's investigation.[3] And while

[3] Later, in August, bowing to international pressure, Iran agreed to permit access to the two sites requested by the IAEA.

initially reducing its purchases of Iranian crude oil in conformity with US sanctions, the Chinese have apparently decided to defy the Trump administration's efforts to drive Iran's oil exports to zero.

North Korea

On North Korea, US differences with China and Russia are not as stark as they are on Iran. Beijing and Moscow share Washington's broad objectives of eliminating the North's nuclear capability and promoting stability on the Korean Peninsula (although the countries assign differing priorities to those objectives). China—which plays a more central role on North Korea than Russia, just as Russia is the more actively involved of the two on the Iran nuclear issue—has often acted in a manner congruent with US policies, including by urging Pyongyang, usually privately but sometimes publicly as well, to avoid provocations such as nuclear and long-range missile tests and engage in serious negotiations with the United States.[4]

Moscow and Beijing have increasingly acted less as Washington's nonproliferation partners and more as its nonproliferation opponents.

However, in recent years, China (usually with Russian support) has increasingly distanced itself from Washington's North Korea policy and moved closer to Pyongyang. It was not a stretch for the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations to consider China a partner on North Korea, with Beijing at times working with Washington to develop negotiating proposals and serving as an intermediary to encourage the North to accept positions favored by the United States.

That has changed. China has become wary of US policies and motives. While Beijing was willing to go along with US-led Security Council sanctions in 2016–17, both to penalize North Korea's provocative nuclear and missile tests and to incentivize Pyongyang to negotiate seriously, it came to regard the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against the North as counterproductive. Never a fan of economic sanctions, China believed harsh pressures could cause Pyongyang to dig in its heels or, worse, could destabilize the regime—an outcome the Chinese regard as threatening to their interests.[5]

[4] Rebecca Savransky, "China urges N. Korea not to conduct missile, nuclear tests," *The Hill*, August 6, 2017, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/345498-china-urges-n-korea-not-to-conduct-tests

[5] Richard C. Bush, "China's Response to Collapse in North Korea," The Brookings Institution, January 23, 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/chinas-response-to-collapse-in-north-korea/

Moreover, while China apparently shares the view of the United States and virtually all other interested governments that the ultimate goal of negotiations must be the complete denuclearization of North Korea, Beijing has had reservations about the Trump administration's approach to pursuing that goal. At least at the outset, the administration called for the rapid and complete elimination of the DPRK's nuclear capability, with Pyongyang receiving compensation only after major progress had been made toward denuclearization. In China's view, denuclearization is a long-term process that can only be pursued patiently and step-by-step, with reciprocal benefits to the parties at each step of the way. Although the Trump administration seems to have adopted a more flexible position in the wake of the failed Hanoi summit in February 2019, Washington and Beijing are still not in sync on an approach to Pyongyang.

In addition, the two protagonists are increasingly at odds on implementation of sanctions against North Korea. While acknowledging that Chinese (and Russian) entities have helped the North Koreans evade sanctions, including on DPRK coal exports and refined petroleum imports, US officials have maintained that the Chinese government, at least through 2018 and part of 2019, had generally complied with Security Council sanctions. But it has become clear that it is no longer a matter of Chinese authorities failing to clamp down effectively on illicit Chinese traders and traffickers. Rather, sanctions evasion now seems to have the approval of the government of China.[6] Moreover, the Chinese and Russians now appear determined to weaken the sanctions regime against North Korea.[7] The two governments jointly proposed a Security Council resolution in December 2019 that would have relaxed existing UN sanctions. It went nowhere because of US opposition.[8]

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[6] US Deputy Secretary of State Steve Biegun hinted at growing US dissatisfaction with Beijing's enforcement of sanctions in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 22, 2020, stating that "there is much more China could do to enforce binding sanctions and prevent sanctions evasion – and we will continue to engage the Chinese on that issue." https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/072220_Biegun_Testimony.pdf

[7] Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, "Maximum Pressure Against North Korea, RIP," *38 North*, October 7, 2019. https://www.38north.org/2019/10/skleineahlbrandt100719/

[8] Michelle Nichols, "China, Russia propose lifting some U.N. sanctions on North Korea, U.S. says not the time," Reuters, December 16, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-un/china-russia-propose-lifting-some-u-n-sanctions-on-north-korea-u-s-says-not-the-time-idUSKBN1YK20W

Syria

Russia and China have actively opposed efforts by the United States and much of the international community to pursue Syria's noncompliance with its nuclear and chemical weapons nonproliferation obligations.

In the wake of Israel's 2007 destruction of a plutonium production reactor that North Korea was clandestinely helping Syria build, Moscow has sought to shield Damascus from IAEA scrutiny of the dimensions of Syria's nuclear program. It has defended Syria's repeated rejection of IAEA requests to visit sites suspected of involvement in the program; voted (along with China) against an IAEA Board of Governors resolution to refer Syria's noncompliance to the UN Security Council; argued that the destruction of the al-Kibar reactor had eliminated any proliferation threat that might have existed and therefore any need to investigate further; sought unsuccessfully (with China) to remove the Syria nuclear issue from the IAEA Board's agenda, and even lent credence to Syria's far-fetched claim—disputed by the IAEA[9] —that the bombed facility was not a nuclear reactor.

Moscow's efforts to shield Syria from accountability for the widespread use of chemical weapons (CW) against Bashar al-Assad's opponents in the Syria civil war are perhaps an even more egregious example of undermining nonproliferation norms to protect an ally. Motivated by a desire to avert US military strikes in response to Syria's CW use, legitimize Assad's regime, and strengthen its own role in the region, Russia joined the United States in 2013 to press Syria to join the Chemical Weapons Convention and destroy its declared stocks of 1,300 tons of CW agents. This joint initiative appeared to be a promising example of US–Russian nonproliferation cooperation, with positive implications for addressing future nonproliferation challenges.[10]

But as it later became clear that Syria had not declared and destroyed all of its CW stocks and continued to use nerve agent sarin and

[9] "IAEA: Syria site bombed by Israel 'was likely nuclear,'" *BBC*, May 24, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middleeast 13530945#:~:text=A%20Syrian%20site%20bombed%20by,the%20UN's%20atomic%20watchdog%20says.&text=But%20the%20confidential%20IAEA%20report,a%20connection%20with%20nuclear%20activities.

[10] Philipp C. Bleek and Nicholas J. Kramer, "Eliminating Syria's chemical weapons: implications for addressing nuclear, biological, and chemical threats," *Nonproliferation Review*, Volume 23, Nos. 1–2, 2016, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10736700.2016.1196853?scroll=top&needAccess=true

chlorine gas on multiple occasions, Russia (often supported by China) resisted UN and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) investigations of Syrian CW use and, in the face of compelling evidence implicating Syrian government forces, strongly opposed any findings attributing CW use to the Assad regime. In July 2020, joined only by Iran, Russia and China opposed a decision by the OPCW Executive Council that found "reasonable grounds to believe" Syria used CW and demanded that it cease such use.[11]

International nonproliferation mechanisms

China and especially Russia have taken positions that could undermine the authority of—and the tools available to—international bodies that play a vital role in ensuring that nonproliferation agreements are effectively implemented and enforced.

Russia has been the leading critic of the "state level concept" (SLC), an IAEA approach to making its safeguards system more effective by taking into account not only information obtained through its own traditional verification activities but also information obtained from other sources, including intelligence supplied by IAEA member states. Moscow has claimed that reliance on third-party information has enabled Western countries, especially the United States, to manipulate the IAEA to serve their political goals, although the Russians seem mainly concerned about information that could incriminate their allies, particularly Iran and Syria.

China and Russia have taken positions that could undermine the authority of international bodies working to ensure nonproliferation agreements are effectively implemented and enforced.

As indicated above, Russia, similarly motivated by a desire to protect client regimes such as Syria, has sought to thwart the efforts of international compliance mechanisms related to chemical weapons. After the UN–OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) attributed CW attacks to Syrian government forces, Russia in 2017 vetoed a Security Council resolution to extend the JIM's mandate. When, over Russian objections, a new investigative mechanism was established under the OPCW's auspices, Moscow (supported by Beijing) tried to obstruct and discredit the mechanism's investigations, going so far as to seek (unsuccessfully) to amend the OPCW budget to gut funding for its investigations.[12] With Russia believed to have used the chemical

[11] Julia Masterson, "OPCW Presses Syria on Chemical Weapons," *Arms Control Today*, September 2020. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-08/news/opcw-presses-syria-chemical-weapons

[12] Alicia Sanders-Zakre, "Russia Blocks Consensus at CWC Conference," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-01/

agent Novichok to poison former Russia military officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in March 2018 and Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in August 2020, Moscow is further motivated to oppose the OPCW having the authority to investigate and attribute CW use.

Discontinued Nuclear Security Cooperation

A huge success story in nonproliferation cooperation was a series of programs begun in the early 1990s after the collapse of the USSR in which the United States provided financial, material, and technical assistance to Russia to dismantle excess delivery systems, eliminate excess fissile material, and upgrade security at a wide range of Russian facilities. A critical goal of these efforts was to prevent proliferation-sensitive materials, equipment, and knowledge from falling into the hands of countries or terrorists aspiring to have nuclear weapons or dirty bombs.

That cooperation no longer exists. Many cooperative projects were successfully completed, such as the "Megatons to Megawatts" program, in which 500 tons of weapons-grade uranium from dismantled Soviet nuclear weapons were purchased by the United States, downblended to low-enriched uranium, and used in US reactors to generate 10 percent of US electricity requirements. But many projects were terminated before completion. In part, this was because the Russians, over time, had come to resent the image of dependence on US assistance and the presence of US monitors at sensitive Russian facilities, and they claimed they were able to perform the necessary security work on their own. The critical additional factor, however, was the sharp downturn in US–Russian relations after Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea: Washington imposed sanctions in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine (including sanctions cutting off bilateral nuclear energy cooperation), and Moscow retaliated later that year by pulling the plug on key nuclear security programs. The US Congress, in the FY 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, prohibited US funding for nuclear projects in Russia.

Among the bilateral projects discontinued in that period were a joint exploration of the feasibility of converting a number of Russian research reactors to operate on low-enriched uranium rather than weapons-grade uranium and the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement (PMDA), a bilateral deal concluded in 2000 committing each side to dispose of 34 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium. Emblematic of the near-total breakdown of bilateral

news/russia-blocks-consensus-cwc-conference

cooperation on nuclear security was President Vladimir Putin's decision not to attend the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit hosted by President Obama.

The reduction in US–Chinese nuclear security and nuclear energy cooperation in recent years has been much less dramatic, largely because such cooperation was never as extensive as US–Russian cooperation. Washington and Beijing have engaged in a range of cooperative activities under the umbrella of the 1997 bilateral Agreement on the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Technology (PUNT), including visits to US facilities to observe nuclear security practices, the establishment of a radiation detection training center, a "Megaports Initiative" to enhance detection capability at Shanghai's container port, and technical exchanges on implementing nuclear export controls. They also cooperated in converting Chinese-built Miniature Neutron Sources Reactors (MNSRs)—first in China and then in Ghana and Nigeria—to operate with low-enriched uranium and repatriating to China the spent highly enriched uranium (HEU) fuel from overseas. In addition, the United States helped China create a Center of Excellence in 2016 for nuclear security training, bilateral and regional exchanges on nuclear security best practices, and demonstrations of advanced technologies for nuclear security.[13]

Heads of delegation for 2016 Nuclear Security Summit gather for family photo in Washington, DC, on April 1, 2016
[Ben Solomon/US Department of State]

During 2016 to 2020, with the downward spiral of US–Chinese relations, nuclear security cooperation significantly declined. In 2018, the United States sanctioned Chinese military entities and personnel for purchasing Russian arms in violation of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, and in 2019, it sanctioned the China General Nuclear Power Group for illegally diverting US nuclear technology for military and other unauthorized uses; both moves prompted strong Chinese reactions. Some technical, working-level contacts have persisted, but senior-level mechanisms to oversee and steer cooperative engagement no longer meet.

[13] Hui Zhang, "China's Nuclear Security: Progress, Challenges, and Next Steps," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2016, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Chinas%20Nuclear%20Security-Web.pdf

Obstacles to Future Nonproliferation Cooperation

The decline in US nonproliferation cooperation with Russia and China will be difficult to reverse. Clearly, the greatest obstacle is the overall deterioration of US relations with its two great power competitors. Such cooperation requires a modicum of mutual trust, but today, mutual trust no longer exists. It requires channels of dialogue and communication, but today, virtually all bilateral channels have been shut down. And it requires a measure of domestic support for bilateral engagement, but public and elite opinion in Russia and Chinese has grown extremely skeptical of the benefits of engagement with the United States, and vice versa.

The continued downturn in bilateral relations could undercut one of China's main historical motivations for constructive engagement on nonproliferation: a desire for better relations with the United States. Beijing has tended to take positive nonproliferation steps when relations with Washington were good or improving and has been less cooperative when relations were declining, especially when it was angered by US actions, such as the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (which some Chinese believed was intentional) or major US arms sales to Taiwan. With relations in a deep freeze, China's incentives for nonproliferation cooperation will probably be reduced.

Another related obstacle is that Russia and China—in balancing their interest in nonproliferation against what they see as their interest in strengthening strategic relationships with friendly countries like Iran, North Korea, and Syria—now apparently assign a higher priority to the latter relative to the former. Sensing an opportunity presented by the prospect of reduced US engagement in the Middle East, President Putin has sought to make Russia a major actor and broker in the region, including by intervening militarily to support Assad in the Syrian civil war and working closely with Iran to ensure Assad's victory and undermine US interests in the region.

Similarly, President Xi Jinping, fearing that summit-level ROK–DPRK and US–DPRK diplomacy could leave China on the sidelines in shaping the future of the Korean Peninsula, decided in 2018 to restore close ties with Pyongyang after a period of estrangement. The growing inclination of Moscow and Beijing to solidify what they regard as strategically useful partnerships helps explain why they now often

back Iran, North Korea, and Syria in key nonproliferation disputes and shield them against further harsh sanctions.

An additional obstacle to cooperation, at least in recent years, has been the opposition of Russia and China to specific nonproliferation policies of the Trump administration. That obstacle could be somewhat reduced under a Joseph R. Biden administration, at least on some issues, such as Iran's nuclear program. But on some other issues—including Syria, the roles and methods of the IAEA and OPCW, and the utility of sanctions as a nonproliferation tool—strong differences predate the Trump administration and would likely remain.

Growing Proliferation Threats Require Russian and Chinese Cooperation

At a time when US nonproliferation cooperation with Russia and China has all but disappeared, challenges to the global nonproliferation regime appear to be increasing.

- With the JCPOA largely hollowed out and Iran rebuilding its enrichment program, fear of an Iranian nuclear weapon, or at least a latent nuclear weapons capability, has returned, and with it, the prospect that Saudi Arabia (and perhaps others in the Middle East) will pursue a matching capability.

- US diplomacy with North Korea has reached a dead end; Pyongyang continues to advance its nuclear and missile programs; and US allies South Korea and Japan, worried by the expanding threat from the North and increasingly uncertain about the reliability of US security guarantees, may re-think the option of acquiring their own nuclear deterrents.

- Assertive postures by Russia and China in their respective regions have elevated the security concerns of their non-nuclear neighbors (including Japan in the case of China).

- Sophisticated illicit networks trafficking in proliferation-sensitive technologies have made detection of embryonic covert nuclear programs more difficult.

- Continued polarization among parties to the NPT—fueled by dissatisfaction that progress toward nuclear disarmament has stalled and concern that US–Russian arms control agreements are unraveling—has impeded efforts to strengthen nonproliferation controls and could weaken the authority of the treaty as a barrier to the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The record of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime has been impressive, defying dire predictions of a world with many nuclear-armed states. Since North Korea acquired nuclear weapons nearly 30 years ago, no additional country has done so. Many factors explain that positive record, but one of those factors has been the

ability of the United States to work constructively with Russia and China from time to time in support of shared nonproliferation goals and interests.

The three countries are critical players on most nonproliferation issues by virtue of the roles they occupy in global affairs. They are all permanent members of the UN Security Council, NPT nuclear weapon states, participants during the 2000s in the Six Party Talks with North Korea, original participants in the JCPOA, and major nuclear energy states and exporters of nuclear technology. Moreover, Russia and China have close bilateral relationships, and presumably a measure of influence, with key states of proliferation concern, including Iran, North Korea, and Syria. And the United States is an ally or partner—and provider of security guarantees or other degrees of assurance—to a number of states that are often regarded as potential candidates for the nuclear weapons club, including Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Japan, and Turkey.

Given these influential roles, few, if any, of today's most pressing nonproliferation challenges can be effectively addressed without cooperation among the three powers.

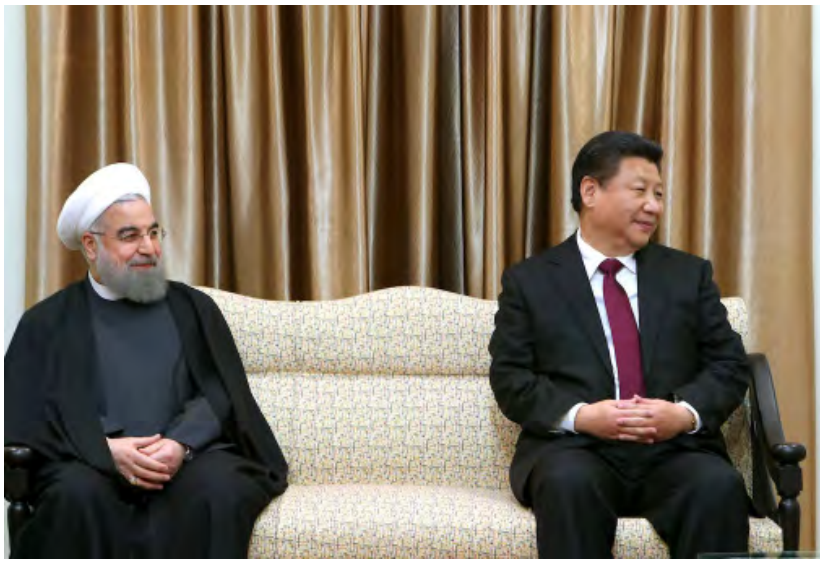
Possible Areas of US Cooperation with Russia and China

Despite the highly acrimonious state of US relations with Moscow and Beijing, efforts should be made to explore prospects for nonproliferation cooperation in some key areas.

Resuming engagement

A first critical step is procedural rather than substantive: establishing channels for nonproliferation consultations. Such channels existed with Russia and China during previous US administrations, sometimes under the umbrella of formal, high-level bilateral mechanisms covering a wide range of issues (e.g., the Bill Clinton administration's Gore–Chernomyrdin Commission, the George W. Bush administration's US–China Strategic Economic Dialogue).

Such top-level umbrella mechanisms are probably not feasible today, at least in the immediate future. But less formal, lower-profile bilateral dialogues on nonproliferation can and should be established. These dialogues—US–Russian and US–Chinese—should be carried out at a high, but sub-cabinet, level (undersecretary or assistant secretary). They should be dedicated to nonproliferation issues and not also seek to address arms control, which should be the focus of separate consultations to allow both subjects to be handled in depth in the limited time available and with the required expertise at the table. Interagency teams on both sides should include officials from foreign, defense, energy, and intelligence agencies. Consultations should be held on a regular basis, not episodically, and should operate with a minimum of publicity to increase the likelihood of more candid interactions.



Xi Jinping of China meets with Ali Khamenei of Iran, January 23, 2016. Source: Wikicommons.

In addition to discussing key policy issues (e.g., Iran, IAEA safeguards, the upcoming NPT Review Conference), these bilateral dialogues could compare assessments on such topics as prospects for proliferation in key regions and technological developments that could affect the global nonproliferation regime. Initial conversations may be stilted, with participants reluctant to share information, especially about friendly countries and sensitive technologies. But over time, as

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professional working relationships are established, the discussions could become more open and useful and participants could become more willing to explore areas of common ground.

If establishing dedicated bilateral mechanisms proves difficult for the time being, the countries should look for opportunities to engage one another on the margins of existing multilateral meetings where relevant officials are present, such as the IAEA General Conference and meetings of the five NPT nuclear weapon states.

Pursuing new negotiations with Iran

Iran's nuclear capabilities will remain high on the international nonproliferation agenda in 2021 and beyond. Whatever the fate of the JCPOA—whether the United States and Iran return to compliance, allow it to die, or leave it in limbo—Washington can be expected to seek engagement with Iran to pursue long-term restrictions on its nuclear capacity and address its destabilizing regional activities. Given strong Iranian mistrust and resentment toward the United States over the Trump administration's JCPOA withdrawal and maximum pressure campaign, it is uncertain whether, and on what terms, Iran's leaders will be prepared to engage. Much will depend on their level of economic desperation (due to the sanctions, COVID-19, and the regime's economic mismanagement), on whether the United States is willing to scale back the Trump administration's far-reaching negotiating demands, on whether Washington is prepared to offer sufficient and credible sanctions relief, and on the balance of domestic forces in Iran in the run-up to and after its June presidential election.[14]

To persuade Iran to come back to the negotiating table and engage constructively—and not to insist on compensation for economic losses suffered from US sanctions or other unrealistic positions—the United States will need the help of its former P5+1 partners, and that means rebuilding bridges destroyed by the Trump administration's self-isolating policies, especially its futile effort to snap back previous Security Council sanctions. And while regaining the support of its European allies and working closely with its Middle East partners will be critical first steps, collaborating with Russia and China will also be essential.

[14] For a discussion of the impact of Iranian domestic politics on prospects for resumed US–Iranian engagement, see Ariane Tabatabai and Henry Rome, "For Iran, Negotiations Aren't Optional," *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/15/iran-negotiations-deal-trump-biden-talks/

Each brings important assets to the table. Having partnered with Iran for decades on its civil nuclear program, Russia has unique insights into Iran's thinking on nuclear energy and unique contacts with its nuclear personnel. Given its enhanced strategic ties with Tehran, Moscow has substantial access to, and probably significant influence with, Iran's leaders. Russia played an important role in implementing the JCPOA and would need to play such a role in a future agreement. And if Russia continues to have a commercial interest in supplying enriched uranium fuel for Iran's nuclear power reactors, it may join with the United States in supporting limits on Iran's indigenous enrichment capacity, just as it did in the JCPOA negotiations.

Although China took a back seat to Russia in the JCPOA negotiations, it played a positive role in JCPOA implementation, co-chairing the working group on converting the Arak plutonium reactor. Moreover, Chinese political and economic ties with Tehran have grown considerably since the 2015 completion of the Iran nuclear deal, as exemplified by plans to conclude a 25-year partnership agreement that would provide for massive Chinese investments in Iran's energy and other sectors, enhanced security cooperation, and steady, discounted supplies of Iranian oil to China.[15] These stronger ties could make Beijing a more influential player in future negotiations with Iran.

However, while Russia and China presumably continue to agree with the United States on the goal of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, getting them to cooperate with Washington this time around on a new agreement will be more difficult than gaining their support in the JCPOA negotiations. They are more inclined now to support Iran as a strategic partner, to oppose sanctions as a means of incentivizing Tehran, to give Iran the benefit of the doubt on its nuclear intentions, and to see the United States rather than Iran as the source of the problem.

A key factor in gaining the cooperation of Russia and China will be the US negotiating position. If Washington hopes to get them (and the Europeans) on board, it will need to alter its current demands and adopt an approach that Moscow and Beijing believe is a reasonable starting point for negotiations. That means confining a new agreement to the nuclear issue (and not linking progress in the nuclear negotiations to important but separate efforts to address

[15] Sune Engel Rasmussen and Aresu Eqbali, "Iran and China Angle for Broad Partnership to Offset U.S. Pressure," *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-and-china-angle-for-broad-partnership-to-offset-u-s-pressure-11594582885

Iran's regional activities), seeking to limit but not eliminate Iran's enrichment program, offering substantial sanctions relief and other incentives, and dropping regime change as an explicit or implicit goal of US policy. It also means reaching out to them at an early stage and taking their views into account in developing the US approach.

Curbing the North Korean threat

Addressing the DPRK nuclear and missile threat will also be a top US goal in 2021, preferably through negotiations or, if that is not successful, continued pressure and deterrence. If negotiations are to succeed, cooperation with China and Russia, mainly the former, will be required.

But, as in the case of Iran, their cooperation is less likely now than it was just a few years ago. A consistent, long-term goal of both countries, especially China, has been to reduce the US military presence and weaken US alliances in East Asia. With bilateral US–Chinese relations cratering and Beijing's suspicions of a US Indo–Pacific containment strategy growing, that goal has assumed greater importance and accordingly the scope for cooperation has substantially narrowed. China increasingly sees US and Chinese interests on the Korean Peninsula as a zero-sum game, illustrated by Beijing's accusation that US deployment of the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea and other US military responses to the DPRK nuclear threat are aimed fundamentally at China.

Nonetheless, while strengthening their ties with Pyongyang and parting ways with the United States on enforcement of sanctions, China and Russia continue to share Washington's interest in a peaceful, nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula, an outcome that would have the benefit, from their perspective, of reducing Washington's need to respond to North Korean capabilities in a way they would regard as threatening, such as a major buildup of US missile defenses. Moreover, they remain concerned that North Korea continues to build up its nuclear and missile capabilities, and they remain wary of Kim Jong Un's intentions and unsure of their future relations with him. And, unlike in the case of Iran—where Russia and China hold the United States wholly responsible for upending the relaxation of tensions that followed the JCPOA—they recognize that North Korea, with its resistance to denuclearization and reluctance to engage in serious negotiations, is at least as much to blame for the current impasse as the Trump administration. So, there may still be a basis, even if limited, for the United States, China, and Russia to find common ground on the North Korea nuclear issue.
But finding common ground on a negotiated solution will require the

three countries, especially the United States and China, to modify their current positions. For Washington, that means accepting that denuclearization is a long-term, step-by-step process, that Pyongyang will have to be provided meaningful incentives at each step of the way, and that the first step will be a partial measure with no reliable guarantee that the goal of complete denuclearization will eventually be realized. For Beijing, it means recognizing that it will have to lean heavily on North Korea to accept strict and verifiable measures and that, even if an agreement can be reached that reduces the DPRK threat, the United States and its allies will continue to reinforce their capabilities to deter the North. And Russia will need to add its weight to Chinese efforts to encourage more flexible North Korean negotiating behavior and to work bilaterally with Washington, given their unique arms control experience, to demonstrate to Pyongyang that effective verification measures can be implemented without compromising national security interests.

But even if the United States, China, and Russia are able to work together effectively in negotiations with North Korea, there is a significant probability that they will come up short. Nothing Kim Jong Un has done since making vague promises at the 2018 Singapore summit suggests that he has any intention of completely eliminating the DPRK's nuclear weapons capability. Indeed, quite the opposite. The one-sided, partial measures he has proposed—especially the 2019 Hanoi offer to shut down only the Yongbyon complex in exchange for the removal of all consequential UN sanctions—would leave his undeclared weapons production program intact and allow him to continue expanding his nuclear capability. And the North continues to resist the kinds of transparency and verification measures needed to provide any confidence that it is complying with its obligations.

Ultimately, it may not be possible to achieve an agreement that would meaningfully and verifiably limit North Korea's nuclear program and provide a credible road map to denuclearization. In that event, the United States would have no choice but to work with its East Asian allies on a long-term North Korea strategy of pressure, deterrence, and containment. But even in those circumstances—with China and Russia more tightly aligned with the DPRK and the United States strengthening its military response to the North Korean threat—the three countries would share an interest in avoiding a military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, and there would be considerable value in their continuing to maintain channels of communication that could reduce the likelihood of armed conflict through accident, misperception, or miscalculation.

Revitalizing nuclear security and nuclear energy cooperation

The most promising area for a resumption of US cooperation with Russia and China is nuclear security: promoting the physical protection and accountancy of proliferation-sensitive nuclear materials in their own countries and abroad, eliminating or effectively disposing of their excess fissile material, minimizing the use of such material in civil nuclear programs at home or in third countries, and repatriating to their own countries fissile material-bearing fuels they have previously supplied to the civil programs of third countries.

Nuclear security is the most promising area largely because the three countries have a genuine common interest in preventing terrorists from getting their hands on the materials needed to make nuclear weapons or dirty bombs. Moreover, that interest rarely competes with other national priorities, such as supporting and defending strategic relationships with allies.

Moreover, US–Russian re-engagement would be facilitated by the long history of cooperation in this area, by the close personal and institutional ties that developed during that long history, and by the apparent desire of technical experts on both sides to resume cooperation. The reservoir of bilateral support for nuclear security cooperation was illustrated by the coordinated diplomatic efforts by Washington and Moscow in 2016, despite the prevailing adversarial state of their relations, to promote the entry into force of the 2005 Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials, which greatly strengthened international efforts to counter nuclear terrorism.

The United States and China do not have the extensive record of nuclear security cooperation shared by Washington and Moscow. But neither do they have the accumulated resentments and internal opposition toward such cooperation that came to bedevil US–Russian nuclear security programs. That has enabled some US–Chinese technical-level cooperation to continue in the current environment and perhaps to expand if it can be insulated from the downward spiral of overall relations.

If US–Russian nuclear security cooperation is to be resurrected, it will have to abandon the past donor-recipient relationship and become a more equal partnership, with both sides sharing best practices (rather than Russia simply adopting US practices) and with each side able to derive the benefits it seeks. That means not only pursuing the nuclear

security agenda favored by the United States, but also cooperating in the fields of nuclear science and nuclear energy that the Russian nuclear establishment has called for, and recognizing (if not welcoming) that Russia's interest in cooperative projects will often depend on its calculation of commercial and reputational gain. It also means focusing significant cooperative efforts on strengthening nuclear security in third countries. A study by prominent US- and Moscow-based think tanks has recommended an extensive menu of possible future cooperation that includes developing the next generation of safe and reliable nuclear reactors; creating proliferation-resistant nuclear fuels; improving the safety of nuclear power plants; improving nuclear security and accounting technologies; and enhancing nuclear security in third-countries embarking on nuclear energy programs.[16]

Absent an agreement on the North Korea issue, there would still be considerable value in maintaining channels of communication that would reduce the likelihood of armed conflict.

Despite the termination of most US–Russian nuclear security cooperation, the two countries have managed to continue as co-chairs of the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT), a multilateral partnership dedicated to strengthening the capacity of its members to prevent, detect, and respond to acts of nuclear terrorism. In the months and years to come, they should look for opportunities to expand cooperation, perhaps initially under the umbrella of multilateral forums such as GICNT and IAEA-sponsored conferences, but eventually by setting up dedicated bilateral mechanisms and re-establishing a legal framework for cooperation by reactivating the 2013 US–Russia Agreement on Cooperation in Nuclear- and Energy-Related Scientific Research and Development, which covered a wide range of activities (including civil nuclear energy, nuclear security and safety, nuclear science, and nuclear nonproliferation) but was suspended in 2016.[17]

Although resumed US–Russian nuclear security cooperation will need to build incrementally, as domestic and international conditions allow, it may be possible over time to return to some unfinished business, including completing the repatriation of HEU reactor fuels from third countries (including Belarus), resuming joint consideration of the

[16] Nuclear Threat Initiative and Center for Energy and Security Studies, "Pathways to Cooperation: A Menu of Potential U.S.-Russian Cooperative Projects in the Nuclear Sphere," February 2017, https://media.nti.org/documents/Pathways_to_Cooperation_FINAL.pdf

[17] For an extensive discussion of opportunities for resuming nuclear security cooperation between the United States and Russia, see Matthew Bunn, "Steps for Rebuilding U.S.-Russian Nuclear Security Cooperation," in *Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Institute for Nuclear Materials Management*, July 16–20, 2017 (Mount Laurel, NJ: INMM, 2017), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/matthew_bunn/files/bunn_steps_for_rebuilding_us-russian_nuclear_security_cooperation.pdf

feasibility of converting additional Russian research reactors, and reviving the PMDA to dispose of excess weapons-grade plutonium. In the future, however, each side would need to pay its own way in such projects to avoid the congressional restriction on assistance to Russia.

Resuming and expanding US–Chinese nuclear security cooperation may face fewer hurdles than US–Russian cooperation. Unlike in the case of Russia, there is a legal framework still in place (the 1997 PUNT agreement) and an ongoing mechanism (the Center of Excellence) that could provide a venue for expert discussions on a range of nuclear security issues.

A serious gap in US–Chinese nuclear security cooperation has been the absence of any engagement since the late 1990s between US nuclear weapons laboratories and their Chinese defense sector counterparts, who are in charge of most of China's weapons-usable nuclear materials and all of its nuclear weapons. Between 1995 and 1998, the two sides used lab-to-lab contacts to discuss material protection, control, and accounting practices applicable to the defense sector, but the Chinese ended such contacts in response to the 1999 Cox Commission report accusing China of spying on US weapons laboratories.[18] In today's political climate, a resumption of lab-to-lab engagement seems highly unlikely, but an eventual restoration of such contacts could make a valuable contribution to strengthening nuclear security cooperation between the two countries.

Strengthening the NPT regime

The United States and Russia—and China after it joined the treaty in 1992—have been strong supporters of the NPT, and they continue to have a common interest in ensuring that it will remain an effective barrier to nuclear proliferation. Their support has been most evident at NPT review conferences, held every five years, at which the United States, Russia, and China, joined by France and the United Kingdom (the other two NPT nuclear weapon states) have traditionally banded together to promote successful conference outcomes and to defend

[18] The Select Committee on US National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China, referred to as the Cox Report after its chairman, Representative Christopher Cox (Republican of California), was established in 1998 to investigate whether technology or information transfers to China contributed to its WMD or missile programs. Marco Di Capua, "The Cox Report and the U.S.-China Arms Control Technical Exchange Program," in Michael M. May, ed., *The Cox Committee Report: An Assessment, Center for International Security and Cooperation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, December 1999), https://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/npp/coxfinal3.pdf

their records against criticism from non-nuclear weapon state parties that they are not doing enough to fulfill their NPT Article VI obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament.

But with the worsening of bilateral relations among the five, that solidarity has begun to crack. At the 2015 Review Conference, the Russians sided with Arab delegations on the contentious Middle East WMD-free zone issue in the hope of isolating the United States and putting the onus on Washington for blocking consensus at the conference.[19] And in preparations for the 2020 Review Conference, loud recriminations among the five, especially between the United States and Russia, have contributed to a pessimistic outlook for the conference.

Reducing Nuclear Dangers

To promote success at the upcoming review conference, which was postponed until 2021 by the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington, Moscow, and Beijing should set aside their differences and seek common ground, including on issues related to nuclear disarmament. Agreement by the United States and Russia to extend the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty would do much to improve conference prospects, as would the beginning of US–Chinese strategy stability talks, which—despite Beijing's current unwillingness to negotiate formal limits on its nuclear forces—could help avoid a destabilizing arms competition and reduce the likelihood of inadvertent armed conflict between the two world powers.

The United Nations Security Council.
Image credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Cooperating in the P5 Process

The "P5 process"—a consultative mechanism initiated in 2009 to facilitate cooperation among the NPT's five nuclear weapon states on NPT matters—has so far produced useful but modest results, such as a glossary of key nuclear terms. To demonstrate to non-nuclear states that they are serious about fulfilling their NPT obligation to reduce nuclear dangers, the five have begun turning to more strategically important efforts, including an in-depth dialogue on nuclear doctrines and policies as well as an examination of nuclear risk reduction measures. They

[19] Thomas Countryman, "Learning from the 2015 NPT Review Conference," *Arms Control Today*, May 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-05/features/learning-2015-npt-review-conference

could make an important contribution by collectively endorsing the 1985 Reagan–Gorbachev statement that a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought or, in the absence of agreement on that, developing a new P5 statement affirming their responsibility to work toward a world in which nuclear weapons play a smaller and smaller role and are eventually eliminated.

Given the current absence of bilateral channels for strategic engagement, the United States should make the most of the P5 process. And although the P5 framework is multilateral, it can provide a venue for informal bilateral contacts.

Fixing the NPT Withdrawal Problem

The United States, Russia, and China should take the lead, whether in the NPT review process or outside of it, to reinforce the effectiveness of the NPT in halting proliferation. A major contribution would be to correct one of the treaty's main shortcomings: if a party exercises its right to withdraw, IAEA safeguards on its nuclear facilities and materials automatically lapse, leaving it legally entitled to use the facilities and materials it acquired under the treaty in a nuclear weapons program. Several past proposals for addressing this problem have had broad support, including among the P5 countries, but were never adopted.[20] With some NPT parties now hinting at withdrawal and possibly considering a run for nuclear weapons, the three countries should work together to fix it.

Strengthening IAEA Safeguards

Russia and the United States could also give a significant boost to the IAEA's safeguards system by resolving their differences on the Agency's state level concept. As recommended by a distinguished group of American and Russian experts,[21] the IAEA should make clear that, while intelligence and other information supplied by member states can play an important role in helping to direct and focus the Agency's resources and activities, IAEA conclusions on safeguards

[20] A working paper submitted to the 2015 NPT Review Conference and co-sponsored by the five NPT nuclear weapon states and many other NPT parties contained several recommendations for addressing the withdrawal problem, but the conference did not achieve a consensus outcome, and none of the recommendations made at the conference were adopted. "Addressing withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," NPT/CONF.2015/WP.47, https://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2015/WP.47

[21] Nuclear Threat Initiative and Center for Energy and Security Studies, "The Future of IAEA Safeguards: Rebuilding the Vienna Spirit through Russian-U.S. Expert Dialogue," forthcoming.

and compliance questions will be based on objective criteria and will rely on its own safeguards methods and investigations, independent of any third-party information. Moreover, to ensure confidence in the impartiality of the IAEA's safeguards findings and judgments, it should be as transparent as possible in communicating to member states how it has reached its conclusions. Of course, a meeting of minds on these matters between Washington and Moscow (and shared by Beijing) would not eliminate disagreements on sensitive, country-specific compliance issues. But it could avoid acrimonious debates on safeguards methods that have muddied compliance issues in the past and wrongfully called into question the authority of an organization vital to the global nonproliferation regime.

Coordinating Nuclear Export Policies

The United States should also seek to engage Russia, China, and other key suppliers of nuclear reactors, materials, and technology on their nuclear export policies. Moscow, Beijing, and Washington have all joined other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in requiring their non-nuclear weapon state customers to accept several nonproliferation controls as conditions of supply, including that they adopt "full-scope" IAEA safeguards on all of their nuclear facilities and materials. But these NSG supply conditions are only minimum requirements.

The United States, as a matter of law or policy, goes well beyond these minimum standards, requiring, for example, that its nuclear cooperation partners adhere to the IAEA Additional Protocol and accept constraints on enrichment and reprocessing (ranging from a requirement to gain US approval for enriching or reprocessing US-origin nuclear material to, in a few cases, the formal renunciation of future enrichment or reprocessing).

Motivated in large part by a commercial desire to boost nuclear exports, most other nuclear supplier governments, including Russia and China, are much less demanding of their customers. The proliferation risk is that countries seeking nuclear weapons, or at least the nuclear infrastructure that could give them a future nuclear weapons option, will choose to deal with suppliers with less stringent controls. Compounding this problem is the generous, government-supported financing arrangements that several supplier countries are prepared to offer to secure nuclear sales. Given the strong determination of America's nuclear competitors to export, it would be unrealistic to expect Washington to persuade other supplier governments to adopt rigorous US nuclear export policies on a worldwide basis. But there may be cases where informal coordination of nuclear supply conditions could be pursued. Take Saudi Arabia,

where vendors from Russia, China, France, South Korea, and the United States are vying to sell reactors to a country whose leader says it will acquire nuclear weapons if Iran does. Washington would have a tough time getting the others to match its demand that the Saudis forswear enrichment or reprocessing for an extended period of time. But perhaps they could all agree to require Saudi adherence to the Additional Protocol as a condition of supply, something Riyadh has so far resisted.

Closer coordination of nuclear export policies by a handful of key nuclear suppliers, especially with regard to particular countries or regions, could help ensure that their competition for nuclear exports does not weaken constraints on the acquisition of proliferation-enabling technologies.

The United States and Russia could also discuss the implications of their nuclear export policies for the proliferation of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. An important feature of Moscow's approach to nuclear exports is its willingness to supply enriched uranium fuel for the life of the reactors it sells to its foreign customers and to take back to Russia the spent fuel from those reactors. To be sure, these practices are commercially advantageous to Russia. Long-term fuel supply arrangements can be very lucrative, and the ability to relieve customers of the burden of managing spent fuel is a strong selling point in the international reactor market. But they are also advantageous for nonproliferation. Long-term supply guarantees for enriched reactor fuel can undercut a customer's argument that it needs to acquire its own enrichment capability, and the removal of plutonium-bearing spent fuel obviates the need for reprocessing.

US experts, including former Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz, have supported a similar approach: the provision of "cradle-to-grave" fuel services—the supply of fresh nuclear reactor fuel and removal of spent fuel—in exchange for a customer's commitment to refrain from pursuing enrichment or reprocessing for a set period.[22] Russian and American nuclear experts could explore how such fuel-service arrangements could reduce incentives for countries now embarked on nuclear energy programs to pursue indigenous enrichment or reprocessing programs.

[22] Ernest Moniz, "Nuclear Non-Proliferation: Steps for the 21st Century," The Hoover Institution, November 2019, https://www.hoover.org/research/nuclear-non-proliferation-steps-21st-century

Conclusion

Since the NPT negotiations of the 1960s and until fairly recently, the United States has been the leading—most often the dominant—player in international efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation. Its pre-eminence in the civil nuclear energy market enabled it to exert major influence over the terms of global nuclear trade. Its superior military capabilities and strong alliances gave allies and partners the reliable security assurances they needed to forgo nuclear weapons and warned non-nuclear adversaries of the risks they would run if they pursued a nuclear capability. Its central role in the dollar-based international financial system gave it a powerful sanctions club to pummel violators of nonproliferation norms. Its unparalleled diplomatic clout, especially during the "unipolar" period following the end of the Cold War, gave it the ability to shape the international nonproliferation agenda. Together, these attributes contributed significantly to the remarkable record of preventing additional states from acquiring nuclear weapons for nearly 30 years.

Cooperation with Russia and China is more difficult now, but also more essential.

But US dominance is declining. It is only one of several increasingly capable and aggressive competitors for worldwide nuclear sales. It remains by far the world's strongest military power, but it is being challenged for local military superiority in the western Pacific and Eastern Europe, and questions are being raised about the sustainability of its overseas military presence and the reliability of its security guarantees. US sanctions are still a formidable coercive tool, but the targets of coercion have become well-practiced in sanctions evasion, and resentment toward what is widely regarded as America's overuse of sanctions has given rise to consideration of how to work around or reduce the international role of the dollar.[23]

These developments do not mean the United States cannot continue to play its traditional leading role in preventing proliferation. Indeed, US leadership will remain indispensable. No other country or group of countries has the resources, the experience, or the will to take its place. But it does mean the United States will need partners,

[23] For a discussion of trends that could increase future nonproliferation challenges, including a decline in the traditional dominant position of the United States on nonproliferation issues, see Eric Brewer, "Toward a More Proliferated World? The Geopolitical Forces that Will Shape the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," Center for a New American Security and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200902_Toward_a_More_Proliferated_World.pdf

now more than ever. And while Washington will naturally look to its allies and friends around the world to cooperate in the fight against proliferation, it will also need to gain the cooperation of Russia and China, which are in an increasingly strong position either to help ensure the success of these efforts or to play a spoiler role.

However, at a time when challenges to the global nonproliferation regime are growing and cooperation with Russia and China in overcoming those challenges has become more crucial, prospects for such cooperation have sharply declined. In pursuing geopolitical objectives increasingly at odds with those of the United States, America's two great power competitors have tended to give their interest in nonproliferation a back seat, especially when supporting strategically important partners that pose proliferation risks. Commercial interests, whether in selling nuclear reactors or securing reliable energy supplies, may also push nonproliferation lower on their hierarchy of national priorities.

Still, even if Russia and China may often give countering proliferation a lower priority than other national objectives, they continue to share with the United States some basic nonproliferation interests. While Beijing places a higher value than Washington on stability on the Korean Peninsula relative to denuclearization, both would like to reduce and eventually eliminate the North Korea nuclear threat and prevent a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. While Russia is more tolerant than the United States of a substantial Iranian enrichment program and Iran's support for its regional proxies, both want to prevent Tehran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and a military confrontation in the Middle East. Although Russia and China do not support some rigorous US nuclear export conditions and have reservations about some US approaches to enhancing nuclear security, none of these countries want their exports to contribute to nuclear weapons programs, and all three are genuinely committed to preventing nuclear terrorism.

The United States must find a way to work cooperatively with Russia and China when their nonproliferation interests converge. But with those relationships reaching new lows and unlikely to improve for the foreseeable future, this will be not be easy. Bridges to constructive engagement have been burned and will be difficult to rebuild. Constituencies for cooperation remain in all three countries, including in government bureaucracies. But with competition the main thrust of current national policies and public sentiment, arguments for restoring cooperation may have a tough time prevailing in internal debates.

As hard as it may be to find common ground in otherwise highly adversarial relationships, it is imperative that the US administration in office after January 2021 make every effort to do so. Cooperation with America's two great power rivals will not always guarantee success in overcoming the growing nonproliferation challenges the international community will face in the years ahead. But the absence of such cooperation will surely increase the risk of failure.

About the Author

Robert Einhorn is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. Einhorn focuses on arms control (US-Russia and multilateral), nonproliferation and regional security issues (including Iran, the greater Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia), and US nuclear weapons policies and programs.

Before joining Brookings in May 2013, Einhorn served as the US Department of State special advisor for nonproliferation and arms control, a position created by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009. In that capacity, he played a leading role in the formulation and execution of US policy toward Iran's nuclear program, both with respect to sanctions and negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 countries. He also helped shape the Obama administration's overall approach to nonproliferation; supported nonproliferation goals through diplomatic contacts with China, Russia, and key non-aligned countries; and addressed nuclear security and strategic stability challenges in South Asia. He played a key role in the development of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and served as US delegation head in negotiations with South Korea on a successor civil nuclear agreement.

Between 2001 and 2009, Einhorn was a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he directed the Proliferation Prevention Program. Prior to joining CSIS, he was assistant secretary of state for nonproliferation from 1999 to 2001, deputy assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs from 1992 to 1999, and a member of the State Department policy planning staff from 1986 to 1992. Between 1972 and 1986, he held various positions at the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), including as ACDA's representative to the strategic arms reduction talks with the Soviet Union. In 1984, he was an international affairs fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Einhorn holds a bachelor's in government from Cornell University and a master's in public affairs and international relations from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University.

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