Preparing for the next WMD elimination mission - Lessons learned from past experiences

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Event Sponsor: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and The Lugar Center

On November 9-10, the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute for International Studies and The Lugar Center co-sponsored the workshop "Preparing for the next WMD elimination mission - Lessons learned form past experiences." About 30 WMD nonproliferation experts gathered in Washington to participate in more than a dozen panel discussions and case studies. The panel discussions examined topics ranging from diplomatic and technical aspects to domestic and international legal aspects of WMD elimination missions. The case studies examined past experiences in Russia, Iraq, and Syria, among others. Each of the presentations was based on chapters that have been prepared for a forthcoming book.

Former U.S. Senator Richard G. Lugar provided the following remarks for delivery during the workshop:

I thank the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and the Middlebury Institute of International Studies for the opportunity to speak today. It is a great pleasure to collaborate with organizations and friends who are dedicated to the vision of protecting the world from the threat of weapons of mass destruction. I congratulate especially Dr. Chen Kane and Dr. Philipp Bleek for their leadership in organizing this workshop and assembling such a knowledgeable roster of experts.

The world first witnessed the horrors of chemical weapons during World War One, with the first widespread, systematic use of poison gas. Since that time, the capacity of humans to employ chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons – so called weapons of mass destruction -- has expanded exponentially. As the destructive power and versatility of these weapons grew, so did their threat to civilian populations. Unlike the chemical weapons of World War I, which were primarily endured by soldiers in the field, today the darkest scenarios for the use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons involve the targeting of civilians.

The huge nuclear weapons arms race following the Second World War saw the creation of vast arsenals of nuclear bombs and delivery systems designed in large part to lay waste to the cities of the Soviet Union and the United States. The technology was accompanied by a doctrine, Mutual Assured Destruction, which ensured that there would be no “limited” nuclear exchange.
The testing of these atomic weapons in the atmosphere spread dangerous radioactivity around the globe, raising health concerns among the people of many countries. Finally, in 1963 the United States, the Soviet Union and other nuclear weapons states agreed to the first-ever nuclear arms agreement, the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which barred all atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Five years later, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty came into force.

Other agreements followed—SALT and START, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, as well as the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention, to name a few. While these accords helped maintain stability, both sides retained enough nuclear firepower to destroy one another’s cities many times over, aboard planes, missiles and submarines that were on hair-trigger alert.

Then, unexpectedly, the Soviet Union collapsed. The Nunn-Lugar program was born out of this epic victory. Even as we marveled at the end of the Cold War, the new nations emerging from the Soviet Union inherited staggering quantities of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and the infrastructure that supported them. Political collapse and economic hardship left warheads, delivery systems, and technology vulnerable to diversion or sale. A vast cadre of scientists, engineers, and military personnel who had spent much of their professional careers supporting the Soviet WMD complex faced the prospect of not being paid. In essence, the political structure and financing that had kept the enormous Soviet WMD industry a tightly controlled and relatively secure system had completely broken down. The prospect of rapid proliferation of knowledge, materials, and even weapons themselves was never higher than at that moment.

Senator Sam Nunn and I, along with a bipartisan group of legislators and advisers, determined that our government had to address the grave proliferation threats posed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the waning months of 1991, we passed legislation establishing the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. Working with people in the former Soviet Union, U.S. experts and resources helped plug security holes, employ scientists, and begin the painstaking work of safeguarding and destroying the Soviets’ materials and weapons of mass destruction.

What has unfolded in the subsequent decades has been a complex mixture of diplomacy, technology, domestic and international politics, and legislation. This process established a firm foundation for eliminating the former Soviet weapons of mass destruction, and established precedents and procedures that were then applied to other contingencies in other parts of the world. I am grateful to the men and women who have engaged in the often un-glamorous work of combating WMD threats over these many years.

Much of this work has been carried out by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, which has for the past six years been headed by Kenneth Myers III. Ken has worked for more than two decades to improve the security of the United States against attacks involving weapons of mass destruction. He is one of our nation’s foremost experts on global proliferation risks and the policies and programs used to mitigate them. I appreciate very much the leadership that he has provided to an agency that is
on the frontlines of the U.S. government’s efforts to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and prevent WMD attacks.

With DTRA leading the implementation of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, I have shared with its dedicated staff many productive adventures in locations and circumstances that few Americans have ever experienced. From snowy runaways at former Soviet bomber bases to biological weapons labs in Georgia; from the chemical weapon destruction facility in Siberia to submarine bases on the Kola Peninsula; from former nuclear weapons test sites in Kazakhstan to the mountains of Albania – it has been my privilege to support the talented professionals of this agency in reducing threats facing our country.

One of the important lessons we have learned over the years is that DTRA and its mission remain as relevant today as they were during the immediate post-Cold War period. Consider the most prominent recent example: the destruction of 600 tons of chemical weapons material from Syria. The fact that this happened in the middle of a civil war, and after no country in the region would accept the chemicals that Syria was giving up, is nothing short of remarkable.

As Ken Myers has explained, planning actually began at the outset of Syria’s increasingly chaotic civil war, in 2011. This shows the value of having a program like Nunn-Lugar that is dedicated full-time to anticipating and countering WMD threats wherever they might occur, rather than having to react to events in an ad hoc fashion, when it may be too late. Ken testified before Congress that a multi-agency review of the tools then available concluded that the U.S. did not have a good way to get rid of bulk chemical agents in a foreign land, especially in a hostile environment where we did not have a cooperative relationship. The agency immediately set out to develop a portable unit that could effectively destroy the dangerous chemicals likely to be found in Syria. They accomplished this complex task in less than six months.

This foresight and expertise paid off in August of 2013, when Syria launched chemical weapons attacks that horrified the international community. Urgent and intense diplomacy led to a U.S.-Russian framework, Syria’s accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, and its agreement to turn over its declared chemical weapons stockpile for destruction somewhere outside the country. The first step was to move the chemicals out of Syria, and here again the Nunn-Lugar program proved vital, providing the majority of the logistics equipment used by the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

However, no nation in the region was willing to host DTRA’s new deployable destruction unit for the most dangerous of the chemicals. DTRA led an all-out effort, in cooperation with many elements of the Defense Department and other agencies, to develop a ship-based destruction system. The mission was accomplished in just 60 days. In August of 2014, DTRA announced that all 600 tons of Syria’s chemical weapons had been destroyed, the first time chemical weapons had been destroyed aboard ship in the open sea.
Such successes, which also include the removal and destruction of Libya’s chemical weapons arsenal starting in 2004, and the destruction of Albania’s Cold War-era chemical stockpile in 2007, are important expansions of Nunn-Lugar’s initial mission to dismantle the former Soviet weapons complex. Though that legacy work has proceeded largely out of public view and with few headlines in the press, its impact has been profound. Nunn-Lugar has deactivated 7,601 strategic nuclear warheads in the former Soviet Union – more than the arsenals of France, Britain, and China combined. The program has destroyed 2,366 nuclear-capable missiles and 674 missile launchers, as well as 33 submarines and 155 bombers. Through Nunn-Lugar, approximately 820,000 rounds of chemical munitions have been destroyed and more than 2,247 metric tons of chemical weapons have been neutralized.

The Nunn-Lugar program also played an important role in ensuring that the newly independent states of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus did not join the list of nations possessing nuclear weapons. With assistance provided through Nunn-Lugar, all three countries made the decision to relinquish their substantial stocks of Soviet nuclear arms.

I recall, for example, many early conversations with President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan. Through Nunn-Lugar, the United States and Kazakhstan forged a partnership to safely destroy the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviets. From that base of cooperation, Kazakhstan emerged as an important player in stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

My attitudes towards the enterprise of arms control have been affected by the time I have spent visiting remote areas in an effort to bolster Nunn-Lugar operations. When one sees Russian SS-18 ballistic missiles being cut up at Surovatikha, or when one witnesses the dismantlement of a Typhoon ballistic missile submarine at the SevMash facility on the approaches to the Barents Sea, or when one views the incomprehensible chemical weapon stockpile at Shchuchye, one gets a clear picture of the effort it takes to put the WMD genie back in the bottle.

These trips themselves were emblematic of another lesson learned, namely, the importance of constant attention by the Congress to ensure that WMD-elimination programs remain robust. As administrations change, priorities shift. Fresher problems draw policymakers’ attention, money gets tight, and Congress and the agencies lose their institutional memory through attrition and turnover. This means there is a continual risk that long-established programs like Nunn-Lugar may be allowed to wither. Over the years I found that it was critical to highlight the threats eliminated and the threats remaining, and to work continually with the committees in Congress, the White House and the agencies to see that Cooperative Threat Reduction programs were adequately funded and had all the necessary legal authorities to respond to emerging threats.

Although the WMD capacity of Russia has declined, the capacities of other nations have expanded. We remain critically concerned about nuclear weapons programs in North Korea and the dangers of instability in Pakistan. The recent nuclear deal with Iran has reduced the immediate threat from its nuclear program, but we must remain vigilant that the pact is closely monitored and enforced. And
nearly 15 years after September 11, 2001, we know that terrorist cells continue to seek weapons of mass destruction.

This is why it is vital that the United States continues to break new ground beyond the former Soviet states in safeguarding and destroying weapons of mass destruction. We must send the clear message that we are willing to go anywhere to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. New opportunities for partnership must be pursued creatively and relentlessly. Some may say that we cannot forge cooperative non-proliferation programs with the most troublesome nations. But the Nunn-Lugar program has demonstrated that the threat of weapons of mass destruction can lead to extraordinary outcomes based on mutual interest. No one would have predicted in the 1980s that Americans and Russians would have worked together to collect dangerous weapons and materials around the world.

Even with the current strained relations between the United States and Russia, which are probably at their lowest ebb since the Cold War, the two sides have continued to find ways to cooperate on this issue that is of vital interest to both. Russia, for example, is one of the parties to the Iran nuclear deal, which imposes the most intrusive and comprehensive monitoring and verification procedures in the history of arms control. Also in 2015, the International Atomic Energy Agency, with U.S. financial support and Russian cooperation, signed an agreement to establish an international nuclear fuel bank at a former Soviet weapons facility in Kazakhstan, a logical host considering its non-proliferation commitment. Under the control and management of the IAEA, the fuel bank aims to discourage the spread to non-weapons states of uranium enrichment facilities, which can be used to make weapons material. This is a goal that the U.S. and Russia share.

Another lesson we have learned is that governments everywhere are attempting to deal with dangerous weapons issues. The chemical weapons arsenal in Syria will not be the last that is discovered. Taking the long view, a satisfactory level of accountability, transparency, and safety must be established in every nation with a WMD program.

Of all the WMD threats, perhaps the most underrated is the threat of biological weapons. Deadly viruses exist in nature and are easier to handle than nuclear materials and harder to detect. Deadly agents can be weaponized through such means as an HVAC system or contamination at a salad bar. Even crude bio-weapons could produce terror and chaos with random outbreaks of deadly diseases.

Africa deserves special attention because Africa combines naturally occurring dangerous diseases such as Ebola, Marburg, and Anthrax with many poorly governed spaces where terrorists thrive. The recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which has claimed more than 11,000 lives worldwide, is a tragic reminder of how deadly these germs can be. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union obtained from Africa the original samples of viruses and bacteria for its vast biological weapons program.
Here again, one can see the importance of having a robust program whose mission is to anticipate and combat future threats before they erupt into the headlines. To protect Americans at home and our service personnel overseas, DTRA is using its biological expertise in Africa, Central and South Asia, and elsewhere to help secure vulnerable facilities, promote cooperative research and transparency in the handling of dangerous pathogens, and help build an early warning system that will enable us to detect and diagnose infections quickly. The Cooperative Biological Engagement Program is now the largest activity within Nunn-Lugar, aimed at countering both man-made and natural biological events.

I believe the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction remains the number one national security threat facing the United States and the international community. I have never considered Nunn-Lugar to be merely a program, or a funding source, or a set of agreements. Rather, it is an engine of non-proliferation cooperation and expertise that can be applied around the world.

Achieving this mission requires constant vigilance. Over the years, I have described international cooperation in addressing threats posed by weapons of mass destruction as a “window of opportunity.” We never know how long that window will remain open. We must eliminate those conditions that restrict us or delay our ability to act. The United States has the technical expertise and the diplomatic standing to dramatically benefit international security.

American leaders must ensure that we have the political will and the resources to implement programs devoted to these ends. The achievements you will be discussing here were not attained as a matter of course. They were accomplished first of all by the unflagging efforts of many skilled and dedicated individuals. They also came about because the Congress and successive administrations provided sufficient funding, often in the face of skepticism and pressures to cut spending. And they were the result of long-term planning and steady political commitment. It is up to all of us concerned with this important issue to ensure those lessons are not forgotten.

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