Remarks by Former Senator Richard Lugar on Military Nuclear Materials

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Former Senator Richard Lugar provided the following remarks upon release of the new report Bridging the Military Nuclear Materials Gap (read more about this event here):

It was my pleasure to serve with Sam Nunn and Des Browne as co-chairs of the NTI Military Materials Security Study Group. This is an exceptionally important topic and one with which I have long been acquainted.

Experience has taught us all that international cooperation is crucial when it comes to securing weapons of mass destruction and the materials needed to build them. The Nuclear Security Summit process has reinforced the power of global cooperation. The Summits have demonstrated that progress on securing and eliminating civilian materials is possible – even during times of turmoil when tensions are running high.

Some might question, though, whether international cooperation is possible when it comes to the security of military nuclear materials. I believe it is – because I saw firsthand how the United States and the Russian Federation were able to cooperate on these issues for more than 20 years.

In 1991, when Sam and I were in the Senate, we were concerned that some of the former Soviet states would be unable to secure and keep track of the nuclear weapons and materials they inherited when the Soviet Union broke apart.

That is why we proposed what became known as the Nunn-Lugar Program. Nunn-Lugar allowed the United States to work with Russia and deactivate thousands of weapons under arms control agreements and secure the rest by providing advanced security systems at locations where they were stored.

It was a bit of a strange situation. We were working with the Russians to dismantle or secure the same weapons that had been pointed at us during much of the Cold War. But we all understood that cooperation with the Russians was necessary to avert catastrophe. If we didn’t act, nuclear weapons and materials could end up escaping from former Soviet territory and into the hands of rogue states or non-state actors bent on killing thousands of innocent civilians. We could not let that happen.

And the Nunn-Lugar Program made a difference. Over 20 years, we worked with the Russians to deactivate more than 7,600 nuclear warheads, destroy more than 2,600 nuclear delivery vehicles, and secure dozens of Soviet-era nuclear weapons facilities, each containing metric tons of dangerous
weapons-usable nuclear materials. This was a remarkable achievement in our national and global security, and I applaud the extraordinary men and women who helped implement this work over the past two decades.

But we cannot consider the Nunn-Lugar Program a one-shot opportunity for international cooperation on the security of military nuclear materials. Despite our significant differences today, we should continue to look for opportunities to collaborate on improving the security of military nuclear materials worldwide.

I am particularly pleased that General Maslin, former head of Russia’s 12th Main Directorate, which is responsible for ensuring the security of Russian nuclear warheads, participated in this study and provided input. One of the strengths of this report is that is informed by the input of numerous former senior military officials who have firsthand knowledge of how to both strengthen security and build international confidence in the protection of these military nuclear materials.

As many of you know, our nuclear security work with Russia has slowed considerably, but our bilateral cooperation on military materials over the past 20 years serves as an example that can be applied to a broader group of countries with military materials.

For example, as recently as two years ago, representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia met on a regular basis to exchange best practices on nuclear security topics. This very useful exchange not only contributed to strengthening the security of military materials, but also to building international confidence in the security of these materials - two of the primary objectives of this study group.

As this new report describes, we should consider doing more of these exchanges with a broader set of countries; we should carry out joint training exercises and expand nuclear security education and certification programs; and we should develop a technical forum where countries can discuss emerging threats facing nuclear security. These are among the many recommendations in the report.

There are skeptics who say that focusing on the security of military nuclear materials is too sensitive or too difficult. Twenty years of cooperation between the United States and Russia on these issues proves the skeptics wrong. It is not only possible, it is necessary to avoid catastrophe.