

Help Russia Help Us
By Richard Lugar and Sam Nunn
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In a campaign speech this week, John McCain cited the “special responsibility” of the United States and Russia to cooperate to prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons. There is a remarkable consensus among the presidential candidates about this imperative. But we must not wait until a new administration in 2009 to advance this vital work. An agreement the Bush administration signed with Russia earlier this month is an essential step for this cooperation. That agreement is now before Congress.

The overriding priority of our national security policy must be to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction. This task is impossible without the cooperation of Russia. Whether our goal is to lock down nuclear weapons and highly enriched uranium and plutonium, to apply pressure to difficult regimes or to provide other countries with assurances of nuclear-fuel services (both providing and removing the fuel needed for civilian nuclear energy), Russia plays a central role.

The United States already has agreements like the one pending with Russia with 18 countries, including China, and two international organizations. They set the nonproliferation conditions for the transfer — for peaceful, civilian purposes — of nuclear fuel, nuclear reactors and their major components, and certain nuclear technologies.

Having an agreement with Russia would also permit joint work on projects to inhibit the spread of nuclear weapons technology. Under the agreement, the United States and Russia, working together with other nations, can close the major loophole in the world’s nuclear-nonproliferation regime: the ability of a nation, like Iran, to walk up to the threshold of a nuclear bomb by building an enrichment plant for allegedly peaceful energy needs, and then simply renounce its binding obligation under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty not to build a bomb.

With this agreement, we can better work with Russia to create an international fuel bank and guarantee the availability of nuclear-fuel services on the international market, undercutting countries that falsely claim they want to enrich and reprocess uranium but only for civilian use. Russia’s role is essential.

Additionally, our two countries could develop new types of nuclear power plants that increase the difficulty of diverting nuclear materials for weapons. We could share technologies to improve detection of illicit nuclear materials. We could enhance the safety of reactors built abroad. But we can do these things only if we have this agreement in place.

Although the agreement creates a framework for cooperation, it doesn't, by itself, authorize any of these projects. Nuclear material that originates from the United States cannot be enriched or reprocessed without our government's approval.

Unfortunately, some members of Congress have come out against the agreement on the grounds that it should be blocked until Moscow does more to thwart Iran's building of a nuclear bomb. Russia can and should do more in this arena, but this agreement is the wrong bargaining chip. Rejecting it would, we believe, have exactly the opposite result.

One goal of this agreement is to prevent more countries from following Iran's path to becoming a nuclear power. We should not sacrifice our most promising long-term nonproliferation strategy in the pursuit of short-term leverage that is likely to backfire.

The critics say cooperating with Russia benefits Russia — and therefore we shouldn't act until Russia does more to benefit us. We heard the same argument in 1991 when the Soviet Union was unraveling, and the two of us urged Congress to help Moscow secure and destroy its weapons of mass destruction.

But we weren't acting to help the former Soviet Union. We were working to protect Americans. After spirited debate, members of Congress from both parties realized that cooperation was the only way to keep ourselves safe.

Since then, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program has deactivated thousands of warheads and secured tons of nuclear materials. The world is safer as a result.

We need to summon that same common sense again today. The agreement for peaceful nuclear cooperation has been submitted to Congress, where by law it will take effect unless both houses disapprove. Virtually every nuclear danger America faces will be made more difficult and more dangerous if Congress rejects it.

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