

Civil Society's Perspective

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What role does and should civil society play in the nuclear renaissance, nuclear disarmament, and nonproliferation? Should these organizations and institutions focus on influencing “elite” policy makers or the public? What are the different messages, if any, for these two audiences? These are a few the important questions that come to mind when I think about why my organization the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and other civil society organizations matter.

Before addressing the specific issues of peaceful nuclear energy, nuclear disarmament, and nonproliferation, at this conference’s penultimate session, I would like to remind us of the human condition on our home Earth. This reminder is to set the stage for understanding the public and civil society’s roles in the issues we have discussed during the past two days.

The world is a complex place. With almost 200 nations, there are many differing political views. Nonetheless, as fellow human beings, we all share common needs and concerns. We all need access to adequate, clean water and nutritious food. We need access to shelter to protect our bodies from harsh weather. We need real safety and security along with the perception of adequate safety and security. We need access to energy supplies for personal and commercial purposes.

Unfortunately, billions of people around the world do not have access to enough clean water or healthy food (and some countries such as the United States have access to too much unhealthy food), to safe buildings, and to adequate supplies of energy, especially electricity. Also, billions of people have experienced security threats from within their countries or from outside their countries.

Now I turn explicitly to nuclear energy and nuclear weapons in addressing some of humanity’s needs for energy and security. Nuclear energy and nuclear weapons have been double-edged swords. Due to the dual use nature of nuclear energy and the nuclear fuel cycle, in particular, these technologies can be used to produce fissile material for both peaceful nuclear

reactors and nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons have been only detonated in war twice (the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War). Many believe that these weapons are horrendous and serve no useful purposes and thus should be eliminated as soon as possible. However, many disagree and believe that nuclear weapons have helped preserve the peace among great powers. They have argued that the world would have experienced a third world war during the Cold War without the mutual deterring effects of nuclear weapons. Of course, these viewpoints are debatable, and I will return to them later when I examine the views of civil society and the public.

Should we abandon nuclear energy use because it may be diverted to military purposes? My answer is, no. But before thinking it is a cure-all or a major solution for countering climate change or enhancing energy security, we need to understand nuclear energy's role and its limitations. Peaceful nuclear energy has provided electricity generation for billions of people. To be more precise, because nuclear energy produces about 15 percent of the world's electricity and the world has about 6.9 billion people, nuclear power generates enough electricity for just over one billion people around the clock.¹ But about 1.6 billion people do not even have access to electricity.² Thus, the challenge is to provide this service to more and more people without increasing security risks. (Nuclear technology has also been beneficial for medicine, agriculture, and other services for humanity.)

Since this conference is focused on very recent developments in nuclear energy and nuclear weapons policy, I will concentrate most of the rest of my presentation on civil society and the public's involvement in these issues in the past two years. I need to make the cautionary note that my relatively brief presentation will not be able to provide a comprehensive examination of the many differing views around the world. Instead because I represent a U.S.-based NGO, I will mostly focus on the United States. But I will make mention of views from parts of Asia and parts of Europe.

Nuclear Weapons Policy, Civil Society, and the Public

In the United States, the biggest recent political developments have been the November 2008 election of Barack Obama as president and the recent November election in which the House of Representatives in Congress has shifted to Republican control and the Senate has become more evenly split with the Democrats having a slight majority. This recent election will undoubtedly make it harder for President Obama to achieve his nuclear weapons policy agenda.

¹ World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power Today," September 2010, available at: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/inf01.html>

² International Energy Agency, "Access to Electricity," *World Energy Outlook 2009*, available at: <http://www.iea.org/weo/electricity.asp>

President Obama galvanized much of the world with his April 2009 Prague speech in which he called for a world free of nuclear weapons. But he cautioned that this might not occur in his lifetime and that the United States will maintain nuclear weapons as long as others have them. According to a late March-early April 2010 poll by the firm AngusReid, “While most Americans would like to see all nuclear weapons in the world eliminated or reduced, they also think it is important to maintain an arsenal.” Most worrisome from the perspective of those who favor nuclear arms control treaties is the poll finding that “two-in-five respondents (43%) think that the U.S. is in a strategically sound position having nuclear arms and it is not in the country’s best interest to participate in international treaties that would reduce or eliminate its arsenal.”³ If this is true for the country as a whole and is reflective of the views of U.S. senators, then this does not bode well for ratification of New START and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would require two-thirds of the senators to vote in favor. Leaders should not be overly led by polls, but rather should do what is correct for their country’s security. Nonetheless, the public’s opinion in democratic countries does matter in shaping politicians’ stances. If democratic leaders want to take their country in a certain direction, they need to communicate that clearly and convincingly to the voters.

Like the American public, civil society organizations in the United States are not monolithic on nuclear weapons policy. On the one hand, organizations such as the Arms Control Association, the Federation of American Scientists, and Physicians for Social Responsibility are strongly in favor of ratifying those treaties, achieving further reductions in global stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and reducing the roles of these weapons.⁴ On the other, while few organizations or influential people are calling for more nuclear weapons, there are those who caution that nuclear weapons still are essential for security purposes and that nuclear weapons cannot be “un-invented”; thus the world will constantly live under the nuclear shadow. To be fair, most analysts in the arms control groups understand the difficulties in moving toward a nuclear weapon free world.

To the credit of constructive critic Christopher Ford, a former senior Bush administration official and a senior fellow and Director of the Center for Technology and Global Security at the Hudson Institute, he cautions that nuclear deterrence “isn’t stupid or insane.” He has challenged “the disarmament community ... not to reject the possibility of deterrence in its nuclear form but rather to understand and work to lessen reliance upon it.” He emphasized this point later in his talk to the 2010 NPT Review Conference by underscoring “the challenge of shaping the future security environment in ways that make it progressively more unnecessary and unwise to rely upon nuclear weapons for deterrence...there is no law of nature that requires the actual existence

³ AngusReid, “Americans Call for Global Reduction or Elimination of Nuclear Weapons,” Public Opinion Poll, April 8, 2010.

⁴ For a more extensive list of NGOs supporting this view, see “Declaration and Recommendations for the 2nd Conference of Parties and Signatories to the Treaties that Establish Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zones,” Civil Society Forum for Nuclear Weapon Free Zones, United Nations, 29 April 2010.

of nuclear weapons; that is a policy choice. It is our challenge to make un-choosing that choice more of a viable option for national leaders in the real world.”⁵

Civil society groups have the obligation to engage in the vigorous debate that Dr. Ford calls us to take seriously. But at times, pro-nuclear disarmament groups have focused almost exclusively on eliminating nuclear weapons, and they have not spent nearly as much intellectual intensity wrestling with and proposing options for the alternative security structure that will be needed in a nuclear weapon free world. One new program at FAS is taking a small, but hopefully important, step in that direction. This program called the International Science Partnership strives to link scientists and engineers in the developed world with their counterparts in the developing world to share best practices and to work together to solve challenging problems in water management, energy supplies, food production, and other resource issues that affect security. The pilot project for the International Science Partnership will be in Yemen.⁶

On nuclear weapons policy, FAS has been a leading NGO since 1945, having been founded by many of the Manhattan Project scientists who built the first atomic bombs. Those scientists sought to prevent nuclear war. FAS has informed and educated policymakers, the news media, and the public through reports, blog postings, articles, briefings, interviews, and film.

FAS and other civil society organizations, however, confront the challenge of getting the public to become more engaged on nuclear weapons issues. Gone are the days of the Nuclear Freeze movement in the early 1980s when millions of people marched in protests in American and European cities. Today, Americans and Europeans are more apt to march in protest of their governments’ inability to create more jobs and improve the economy as shown most recently by protests in Ireland, England, France, Portugal, and other European countries. This should come as no surprise. The fear of a massive thermonuclear war has receded thankfully with the passing of the Cold War. So, Americans and Europeans do not perceive the imminent nuclear threat to their lives. While elites such as George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn have called for a nuclear weapon free world, the likelihood of President Obama being reelected hinges far more on his administration’s ability to stimulate the economy rather than to convince the Senate to ratify arms control treaties. But civil society organizations know that these treaties are important because they are connected to international political efforts to strengthen the nonproliferation system. Thus, even if the public is not that immediately engaged in these issues, civil society organizations need to provide the information and analysis and most importantly the independent, non-governmental point of view.

While a majority of the U.S. public perceives benefits in pursuing nuclear disarmament and similarly in the United Kingdom, people in Russian and Iran, for example, have different

⁵ Christopher Ford, “An Alternative Civil Society View of Nuclear Deterrence,” Remarks Delivered to the 2010 NPT Review Conference, May 7, 2010.

⁶ For more on this project, see <http://www.fas.org/blog/earthsystems/2010/11/engaging-yemen-on-the-sources-of-insecurity/>

perspectives.⁷ A July 2010 AngusReid poll finds that most Russians do not support nuclear disarmament; specifically only 19 percent polled do. That downward trend is remarkable considering that a 1991 poll showed 48 percent in favor. The 2010 poll showed that 60 percent polled wanted Russia to maintain its nuclear weapons.⁸ These people apparently have perceived a security benefit derived from these weapons. Indeed, the Russian conventional military is in a weaker position than during the Cold War; leaders in Moscow perceive nuclear weapons as countering that conventional inferiority. Turning to Iran, WorldPublicOpinion.org published multiple polls of Iranians and analysis of polls in February 2010. On the nuclear program, 55 percent of Iranians polled supported only developing a civilian nuclear power program; 38 percent supported both this program and nuclear weapons development; and only 3 percent did not want either. Interestingly, these poll numbers barely changed among supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the main opposition candidate to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the recent presidential election. Their poll numbers were 57 percent in favor of just a nuclear program, 37 percent wanting both peaceful and military nuclear power, and 6 percent against both.⁹ This result indicates how strongly nuclear energy and even nuclear weapons have become nationalistic issues in Iran and that a major change in government would not necessarily alter the perceived value in the nuclear program.

There is a critical need for independent civil society organizations in Russia and Iran and many other countries. However, even if there were many more of these organizations, the security perceptions of political leaders and the public would not necessarily change. But civil society organizations are still needed to provide alternative voices and independent assessments of government policies.

Nuclear Energy, Civil Society, and the Public

Like Dr. Ford's point about nuclear weapons being a choice for addressing aspects of security concerns, nuclear energy is also a choice because people have more than one means to produce electricity. In the United States, nuclear power has had its ups and downs. On the positive side for the industry, the United States still leads the world with the largest number of nuclear power reactors with 104. But a new reactor has not been built since 1996 and that one was ordered in 1972. Although a few new reactors will likely be built in the coming ten years because of federal government incentives, the nuclear power industry faces fierce economic competition from natural gas—recent extraction methods have greatly expanded the available supplies and thus significantly lowered the price—and coal remains cheap. While nuclear fuel

⁷ For a news story on the recent UK poll, see Peter Griffiths, "Britain Should Rethink Nuclear Weapons Policy," Reuters, July 13, 2010.

⁸ AngusReid, "Russians Vehemently Oppose Nuclear Disarmament," Public Opinion Poll, July 18, 2010.

⁹ Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Stephen Weber, and Evan Lewis, "An Analysis of Multiple Polls of the Iranian Public," WorldPublicOpinion.org, February 3, 2010.

itself is not that expensive, the capital cost of a nuclear power plant is considerably higher than the capital costs of natural gas and coal power plants.

Although much of the U.S. public had turned against nuclear power after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, a recent poll (prepared for the Nuclear Energy Institute, which lobbies for the nuclear industry) shows that public support has reached record high levels.¹⁰ While a poll prepared for NEI may raise concerns about bias, other polls in recent years show a similar upward trend. But the point here is that public support, while important, is not enough to surmount the real economic barriers. In contrast, in countries where government has strong ownership of electric utilities or where government has a more centralized decision making role in electricity production and energy supplies, nuclear power has faced a more favorable economic and political environment as long as those governments have the financial wherewithal to support building nuclear power plants.

Nonetheless, public support does matter for the nuclear industry. Places where the public gains a clear benefit from nuclear generated electricity have had strong public support. These benefits include relatively high paying jobs and electricity rates that are cost competitive. Also in countries such as the Republic of Korea, Japan, and France, which lack substantial natural deposits of fossil fuels, the public has supported nuclear energy to enhance their countries' energy security.

But when nuclear power appears to be more of a liability than an asset, the public has looked unfavorably on it. The safety of nuclear plants used to be a major concern, but industry has made significant progress since the 1979 Three Mile Island and 1986 Chernobyl accidents. The major concern remains how to dispose of nuclear waste. The public has generally viewed this issue as a liability. Even in France with strong public support for nuclear power as an electricity generator, the public has expressed serious concerns with radioactive waste because of "the lack of any perceived benefit."¹¹ The French government in 1990 appointed politician Christian Bataille to investigate options for resolving the impasse. In discussions with French citizens, he discovered that "the idea of burying the waste awoke the most profound human myths. In France, we bury the dead, we don't bury nuclear waste ... there was an idea of profanation of the soil, desecration of the Earth." To address this concern, he realized that the nuclear industry needed to demonstrate to the public that the nuclear waste would not necessarily be buried permanently but instead would be "stocked" for potential future use depending on the advancement of technology.¹² (France has been reprocessing its spent nuclear fuel in a once-

¹⁰ Ann Stouffer Bisonti, Ph.D., President, Bisonti Research, Inc., "Public Support for Nuclear Energy Research Reaches Record High as Policy Leaders Voice Need for New Nuclear Power Plants," Perspective on Public Opinion, Prepared for the Nuclear Energy Institute, June 2010.

¹¹ Jon Palfreman, "Why the French Like Nuclear Energy," Reading for the PBS Documentary Frontline, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/reaction/readings/french.html>, accessed on November 24, 2010.

¹² Ibid.

through cycle but has not fully closed the fuel cycle in order to burn up long lived fissionable material.) While it is true that fissionable materials in the waste can be used to make electricity in reactors, it is also true that the fission products will not be able to be consumed. Thus, there will be the need for permanent waste repositories. This issue illustrates the essential role of civil society organizations to serve as independent evaluators of government proposals in order to help form better public policy and to inform the public about the real risks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first step in the way forward is to understand that there are no easy solutions to the issues we have discussed at this conference. For those who advocate nuclear disarmament, they need to devote as much or more intellectual energy to developing means to address countries security concerns as they devote to promoting nuclear abolition. Dramatically improved relations among nations are the necessary for the path to open up for serious consideration of eliminating nuclear weapons. For nuclear energy, it will have a continuing role to play in generating electricity as long as the highest standards are met for safety, security, and safeguards. Governments alone will not be able to address these complex issues. Civil society organizations are needed to further the debate, evaluate government policies, and inform the public.