

Case 67

Cooperative Security and the Nunn-Lugar Act

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989

Scott Kohler

Background. Foreign affairs in the second half of the twentieth century were dominated by the specter of the Cold War. In the aftermath of victory in the Second World War, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union worsened rapidly, soon calcifying into a barely restrained hostility that cast its shadow across the earth. For decades, the two superpowers raced to develop and mass-produce weapons capable of enormous destruction, always wary of falling behind in the largest military buildup the world had ever seen. Converted into 2005 dollars, the United States, between 1950 and 1990, spent over \$16.3 trillion “creating and maintaining a large peacetime military establishment, essentially for the first time in its history.”¹⁰⁰⁰ This huge cost was justified by the need to deter and contain the seemingly imminent Soviet threat.

Yet in the mid-1980s, the character of the Cold War began to subtly change. While its two principals still had thousands of nuclear missiles pointed straight at each other’s cities, the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev began to undertake a process of mild political and economic liberalization that awakened the hopes for a possible *détente*. Among those working to de-escalate tensions between the two superpowers were several major American foundations. Soon after Gorbachev became the Soviet president, the Carnegie Corporation of New York joined with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the W. Alton Jones Foundation, as Jane Wales, then a Carnegie program officer, recounts, “in supporting a group of U.S. and Soviet scientists that served as a brain trust to the Soviet president developing options for nuclear arms control and disarmament.”¹⁰⁰¹ This partnership marked the first time nuclear scientists from the two nations had had any sort of sanctioned collaboration.

Strategy. Throughout the 1980s, MacArthur and Carnegie in particular were major funders of research and exchange efforts aimed at bridging the Soviet-American divide. Much of this support was aimed at think tanks, particularly the Washington-based Brookings Institution.¹⁰⁰² Meanwhile, the Soviet system was in fact crumbling, despite Gorbachev’s best efforts to repair and save it. And as the Cold War came to a close, work funded by these foundations would play a critical role in shaping the United States’ response to the collapse of its longtime rival.

In a 1989 grant proposal to the MacArthur Foundation, the Brookings Institution’s foreign policy research staff contended that “a conjuncture of economic and political circumstances now provides a unique opportunity for the United States jointly with the Soviet Union to shape their foreign and defense policies and budgets in a way that would markedly improve ...the international political climate...”¹⁰⁰³ Brookings’ proposal was approved, and in December of that year the MacArthur Foundation committed \$5 million to the think tank over the next five years.

With that grant, as well as support from Carnegie and its own endowment, researchers at Brookings began to develop the framework for a collaborative approach to de-escalation and nuclear threat reduction. This approach, dubbed “cooperative security,” called for transparency in securing nuclear technologies and reducing each nation’s respective arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Even considering Gorbachev’s reforms, and the improving relations of the two superpowers, cooperative security still represented, at the time, a radical departure from decades of zero-sum politics and mutually assured destruction.

A number of scholars were involved in this work. Publications such as “Cooperative Security and the Political Economy of Non-Proliferation,” by Wolfgang H. Reinecke, and *The Logic of Accidental War*, by Bruce G. Blair were funded in part by grants from these foundations. And with the support

of the Carnegie Corporation and the MacArthur Foundation, Brookings “formed a consortium with the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard, the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford, and the Carnegie Endowment for Peace in Washington.”¹⁰⁰⁴ By 1991, the scholars collaborating through this partnership had concluded that “cooperative security principles appear to offer the most promising, perhaps even necessary, context for developing a redesigned and consolidated set of proliferation controls.”¹⁰⁰⁵

Especially significant was the collaboration of John Steinbruner, director of Brookings’ Foreign Policy Studies Program, with Ashton Carter of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and William Perry, then a professor at Stanford. With funding from MacArthur and Carnegie, the three laid out an approach to Soviet-American cooperative threat reduction in *A New Concept of Cooperative Security*, published in 1992.

Even before the work’s publication, however, the three presented their innovative approach in a paper given at the 1991 Aspen Congressional Seminar. Hosted by former Senator Dick Clark, and partially underwritten by the two foundations, the seminar that year was attended by Senators Sam Nunn (D-GA), and Richard Lugar (R-IN). The presentation resonated strongly with the two senators, both of whom were concerned about the danger that unsecured Soviet nuclear weapons might fall into the wrong hands, or be deployed by accident as command and control mechanisms began to fail.

Senator Nunn, for his part, had recently failed to secure a vote on the Senate floor for a \$1 billion relief package for the Soviet Union, and he understood well that many of his colleagues in Congress were strongly opposed to the idea of bailing the Soviet Union out of any trouble. Nonetheless, Ashton Carter’s presentation “had an astounding effect”¹⁰⁰⁶ on both senators, and the two decided to spearhead a bipartisan effort to improve the security of the Soviet WMD arsenal. Briefed regularly by Steinbruner, Carter, and Perry, the two senators set about making the case to their fellow lawmakers that American assistance could, and should, help the Soviet states destroy their stockpiles of poorly secured nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

Outcomes. Only weeks later, in mid-December, Congress approved the Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act of 1991. More commonly known as the Nunn-Lugar Act, the bill set up a fund to pay for the dismantling of Soviet weaponry, the secure storage of nuclear materials, and the cleanup of nuclear facilities.¹⁰⁰⁷ As detailed in S.313, a bill removing several restrictions upon the original act, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program has, “as of January 2005:

- (A) Deactivated 6,564 nuclear warheads;
- (B) Destroyed 568 intercontinental ballistic missiles;
- (C) Eliminated 477 intercontinental ballistic missile silos;
- (D) Destroyed 17 mobile intercontinental ballistic missile launchers;
- (E) Eliminated 142 bombers;
- (F) Destroyed 761 nuclear air-to-surface missiles;
- (G) Eliminated 420 submarine-launched ballistic missile launchers;
- (H) Eliminated 543 submarine-launched ballistic missiles;
- (I) Destroyed 28 strategic nuclear submarines; and

(j) Sealed 194 nuclear test tunnels or holes.”¹⁰⁰⁸

In addition, the Nunn-Lugar Program, with over \$5 billion spent to date, has funded work by thousands of scientists with WMD expertise from the former Soviet states.¹⁰⁰⁹ Nunn-Lugar has helped these scientists, whose knowledge, as Al Hunt points out in the *Wall Street Journal*, “would be a treasure trove for terrorists,” transition into non-weapons research “such as environmental modeling and pollution cleanup.”¹⁰¹⁰

Impact. William Perry, who became Secretary of Defense under President Clinton,¹⁰¹¹ has said that Nunn-Lugar “built a channel of trust and cooperation with the former Soviet Republics and in my mind (without any doubt) was the critical factor in leading . . . three of these nations, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, to agree to become non-nuclear states.”¹⁰¹² And Senator Lugar believes that “Nunn-Lugar assistance helped encourage the Ukraine to sign the nuclear proliferation treaty (NPT) and as a result the START I treaty was finally entered into force. In effect, Nunn-Lugar helped to break the START I logjam.”¹⁰¹³

Senator Nunn once referred to the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program as “a very solid success.”¹⁰¹⁴ It is safe to say he was being modest. Nunn-Lugar set the tone for Russo-American relations in the aftermath of the Cold War. And while that relationship is still not perfect, it is far better than it might have been. It is important to remember that many lawmakers were adamantly opposed to any cooperation with, let alone financial or technical assistance to, America’s perceived Communist enemy. Even a few weeks before Senators Nunn and Lugar partnered to endorse the principles of cooperative security developed by Carter, Perry, Steinbruner, and their colleagues at Brookings, Harvard, Stanford, and the Carnegie Endowment, the idea seemed far-fetched. That this changed—and did so rapidly enough to keep pace with the sudden collapse of the Soviet empire—is a credit to the lawmakers who understood the urgency of the situation. Al Hunt is probably closer to the mark when he writes that Nunn-Lugar “may be the greatest international investment since the Marshall Plan.”

To draw a straight line from the grants made by Carnegie and MacArthur to the passage of the Nunn-Lugar Act would be a gross oversimplification, and would probably exaggerate the foundations’ role in a story that is far bigger than any one of its parts. But it is undeniable that, from at least the mid-1980s, those two foundations were promoting strategic collaboration between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., particularly in the area of WMD control. The foundations helped shape the research agenda, as described in a Brookings report stating that “the purposes of the MacArthur Foundation effort have been made integral to our research planning. . . .” They organized and supported the consortium that produced a groundswell of research and analysis, culminating in the work of Carter, Perry, and Steinbruner to propose a cooperative threat reduction plan. The two foundations also helped to orchestrate the crucial meeting at which the arguments of the former were presented to Senators Nunn and Lugar. The resulting legislation has made enormous inroads in securing former Soviet WMD arsenals, and, while much remains to be done, much has already been accomplished thanks to the spirit of cooperation and détente that has developed between the onetime adversaries of the Cold War.

Notes

1000. John Steinbruner. “Memorandum to 2050 Project Steering Committee,” 12/30/1993.

1001. Jane Wales, *Advancing Stability in an Era of Change*. (New York: Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 2000).

1002. Between December 1984 and December 1989, for example, the MacArthur Foundation made seven grants to Brookings. The last of these, a \$5 million investment over five years, funded much of the policy research described later in this case.

1003. “Proposal to The MacArthur Foundation from the Brookings Institution,” 6/22/1989, 2.

1004. MacArthur Foundation, *Annual Report*, 1991.

1005. Ibid.
1006. Sam Nunn, White House Forum on the Role of Science and Technology in Promoting National Security and Global Stability, March 29–30, 1995.
1007. Rich Kelley, “The Nunn-Lugar Act: A Wasteful and Dangerous Illusion.” Foreign Policy Briefing No. 39, 3/18/1996, available from <http://www.cato.org>.
1008. “The Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act of 2005,” S.313, 109th Congress, 1st Session. 2/8/2005.
1009. Albert R Hunt, “Take the Cuffs Off Nunn-Lugar,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7/25/2002.
1010. Kathy Read, “Nobel Peace Prize: Nunn, Lugar More Deserving,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 10/15/2002.
1011. Ashton Carter became Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy.
1012. William Perry, White House Forum on the Role of Science and Technology in Promoting National Security and Global Stability, March 29–30, 1995.
1013. Richard Lugar, White House Forum on the Role of Science and Technology in Promoting National Security and Global Stability, March 29–30, 1995.
1014. Sam Nunn, *White House Forum on the Role of Science and Technology in Promoting National Security and Global Stability*, March 29–30, 1995.