

Session 8: Russia's Nuclear Energy

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Summary

Russian nuclear energy experts Leonid Ryabikhin, Viacheslav Amirov and Mikhail Kobrinskiy discussed current and future prospects of the nuclear power industry. Concurrently, Retired US Air Force General Jonathon George presented on nuclear issues in the broader US-Russia relationship.

Viacheslav Amirov outlined the history of Russia's nuclear energy program. Originally the Soviet Union was a pioneer in the field of nuclear research and energy, however the uncontrolled conversion to a market economy in the 1990s caused serious degradation of nuclear machinery and expertise. Since then the Russian government has committed to a revival of Russia's nuclear energy industry. The government hopes that this conversion will diversify Russia's economy and reduce its dependency on mineral exports.

Russia has 32 nuclear power plants currently in domestic operation. This accounts for 15-16% of its total electricity production and around 5% of household heating. As new nuclear power plants become operational, nuclear energy will account for around 23% of Russia's electricity production by 2020.

Mikhail Kobrinskiy discussed popular threat perception as it relates to nuclear energy. He argues that a 'culture of safety' dominates that grossly conflates the risk of perceived dangers. Since in the modern era anthropogenic disasters can be on a comparable scale to that of natural disasters, a philosophy of safety has become preponderant among advanced societies in relation to nuclear energy.

Mikhail Kobrinskiy offered the example of motor vehicle accidents. According to the World Health Organization [WHO] car crashes account for around 1,000,000 deaths worldwide and around 50,000,000 injuries every year. By contrast, the risk of being injured in a radiological accident at a nuclear power plant is negligible. Nevertheless, popular anxieties in relation to nuclear power plants greatly exceed that of vehicle accidents.

This was reinforced by the Fukushima disaster. Even though some 27,000 Japanese died in the earthquake and tsunami, and no one has been exposed to critical levels of radiation at Fukushima, the latter continues to dominate the global media and has done since the very beginning of the disaster.

These fears, mostly irrational, serve to stiffen resistance nuclear energy. Mikhail Kobrinskiy cited popular myths including; that nuclear power was harmful to the environment; exposed workers to radiation; and led to nuclear weapons proliferation as particularly acute challenges for Russia's nuclear energy industry.

Jonathon George broadened the discussion to the topic US-Russian nuclear relations. He observes that very few nuclear issues can be resolved globally without cooperation between the two largest nuclear arsenals. Reductions in fissile material, and cooperation on safeguards and best practice measures is now possible since the Obama administration 'reset' relations with the Russian Federation in a break from the previous administration's policy.

The panel concluded that despite the impediments of increased threat perception in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, the Russian nuclear industry still had over 50 foreign and domestic projects underway. Current demand combined with ongoing government support indicates Russia's nuclear industry still has confidence for the future.

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