

Book Review

Our Own Worst Enemy? Institutional Interests and the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Expertise by Sharon K. Weiner, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 358 pages

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The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought about a number of unintended consequences and unusual problems pertaining to the weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Soviet nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons complexes found themselves dispersed across newly independent states with their future being very uncertain and their funding severely reduced, delayed, or withdrawn. This happened against the background of major international treaties prescribing expensive downsizing or elimination of large parts of those complexes. As a result, Russia and other former Soviet Union states faced interrelated tasks pertinent to conducting nuclear and chemical disarmament and preventing proliferation of sensitive materials and expertise to state and non-state actors, which they found very difficult to address without external assistance. The United States and later other countries recognized the urgency and magnitude of this problem and tried to help address it by launching a plethora of assistance programs focusing on very different goals ranging from ending further production of nuclear materials to eliminating stockpiles of chemical weapons.

Sharon K. Weiner's book focuses on how the United States cooperated with Russia and other states of the former USSR on dealing with arguably the most complex program goal: the stabilization of employment of former Soviet personnel with WMD expertise in order to prevent possible proliferation of their knowledge. The book deals mostly with Russia and initiatives to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons expertise there, but initiatives from other countries or concerning other kinds of WMD expertise are often discussed to provide necessary background and comparison.

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In the first two chapters, the author sets the stage for further analysis by introducing the purpose and methods of the book and explaining the origins, nature, and scope of the threat that proliferation of WMD expertise might represent. The author concludes here that even though “the feared mass exodus of weapons experts never occurred,” a “significant minority of weapons and weapons-related experts saw the sale of their expertise as a useful and proper means of increasing their income.” (Relevance of this conclusion was underscored in 2011 in the IAEA discussions of Vyacheslav V. Danilenko’s involvement in the Iranian nuclear program). The author also provides a useful, succinct “tour d’horizon” of all U.S. assistance programs in this area, including acronyms associated with them and departments they belonged to. People who worked with or tried to study the multitude of assistance projects to the former Soviet Union states know how important, and at the same time difficult, it could be to maintain an up-to-date and reasonably full picture of such projects.

In the third chapter Weiner discusses the United States (and to a lesser extent Russian) domestic political background against which the concept of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) was created and gave rise to all assistance projects, including those focused on non-proliferation of weapons expertise. As Weiner aptly notes in this chapter, the “CTR encountered the myriad problems that it takes to implement a national security initiative that depends upon cooperation between former enemies, yet lacks unified domestic political support in both Russia and the United States.” This chapter is interesting on various levels. First, it allows scholars and involved officials in recipient states to better understand the U.S. political and institutional process and decisions it produces. Second, in this very thoroughly researched chapter Weiner demonstrates that most, if not all, of the problems encountered later by the CTR-type projects can be traced back to the time when the concept of CTR and specific projects were debated.

Weiner shows that some later issues, such as the unrelated political conditions attached to assistance programs or an inordinately small share of appropriated assistance funds that would ultimately reach the recipient, can be seen as products of specific twists and turns of an early U.S. debate on whether the CTR was a defense or charity program in its nature. Weiner additionally shows that other problems encountered later, such as arguments over liability, access, and tax exemptions, also stem from specific decisions made by the Russian side in the early stages, and reconsidered later. The best example of this is not included in the book, because it happened probably about a year and a half after the book was finished. One of the programs reviewed in the book is the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC). On 11 August 2010 the President of Russia signed a decree mandating a withdrawal from a multi-government agreement that created that center. No reason for this step was given officially. However, some experts suggest that the withdrawal has to do with concerns that were expressed by Russia in the process of ISTC creation

and documented in the discussed chapter of this book: perceived influence of foreign governments in Russian security affairs and scientific priorities, and, especially, the ISTC providing a legal vehicle for select scientists to receive targeted funding for their research, which “would mean that Russian institute directors would no longer have control over how money was distributed in their institutes.” Some experts argue that in the new economic and political environment Russia might have decided to reject the ISTC.

In the next four chapters the author reviews a number of specific assistance projects: the U.S. Defense Department’s Defense Conversion program and Defense Enterprise Fund; the ISTC and its sister program the Science and Technology Center (STCU), U.S. participation in both of which were managed by the U.S. State Department; and the U.S. Department of Energy’s Initiatives for Proliferation Prevention (IPP) and the Nuclear Cities Initiative (NCI). (Out of all programs reviewed in these chapters, only the IPP and the STCU remain fully operational as of the end of 2011). These case studies describe the approach and actions of each program, as well as the relevant institutional and bureaucratic processes in the United States, and show how they can influence one another, place limitations on assistance programs’ implementation and success or even shift their goals and purposes. The review of all programs is done in accordance with approximately the same structure, which allows the author to consistently compare assistance programs and institutional processes and derive convincing findings in the final chapter.

The first finding is a fairly detailed description of how the institutional interests can distort original assistance programs and intentions by “harmonizing” them with practices already existing at their host departments. The second finding is that although the number of WMD scientists actually redirected or reemployed with the assistance of the discussed efforts is much smaller than originally intended, both the United States and Russia benefited from these programs because they created more transparency, engagement, and good will than would have existed between the two states otherwise. Finally, the author argues that although in the new economic and political environment the nature, burden sharing arrangements, and even geographical focus of assistance programs may very well change, the lessons derived in this book will likely stay relevant for future scientist redirection programs as well.

This thorough, meticulously researched book presents the results of probably more than a decade’s work. It is based not only on a very large number of well-referenced published sources, but also on extensive interview material and other communications by author with an impressive number of officials, scientists, and other key individuals in the United States, Russia, Ukraine, and other states. This book should be recommended as an authoritative resource to those who study or want to successfully implement CTR-type projects, regardless of their geographical location.