

A conversation with Joan Rohlfing on December 8, 2014

Participants

- Joan Rohlfing – President and Chief Operating Officer, the Nuclear Threat Initiative
- Nick Beckstead – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: This set of notes was compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and gives an overview of the major points made by Joan Rohlfing.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Joan Rohlfing as part of its investigation of nuclear weapons as a potential global catastrophic risk. Conversation topics included: the Nuclear Threat Initiative's work and opportunities a new funder entering the field.

Background on the Nuclear Threat Initiative

The Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) was founded by Ted Turner and Sam Nunn in 2001. NTI works to reduce nuclear, biological, chemical, and cyber threats. They primarily focus on reducing nuclear and biological threats. They have had a major focus on securing nuclear materials in order to prevent terrorism, working to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons globally, and creating regional disease surveillance systems to detect and respond to infectious disease outbreaks whether naturally occurring or intentionally introduced.

NTI's primary focus has been on designing and implementing innovative field projects that directly reduce threats and also demonstrate new approaches for governments. In addition, NTI:

- Organizes Track 1.5 diplomacy (bringing together government and non-government stakeholders) to build international consensus and action on threat reduction priorities. NTI has found that Track 1.5 diplomacy can be particularly impactful.
- Conducts and publishes research.
- Works to raise public awareness of the threat.
- Advocates for policy change.

NTI's budget

NTI's annual budget is around \$17 to \$18 million, but its expenses are closer to \$15 million. Each year, NTI raises all the money it needs to operate. NTI used to allocate roughly 70% of its budget to nuclear and 30% to biological threats, with occasional work on chemical threats. Recently, it has allocated about 90% to nuclear and 10% to biological threats, but it aims to return to an allocation of about 70% to nuclear and 30% to biological threats in the future. NTI is beginning to work on cyber threats; its work in this area could grow in the future.

About 75% of NTI's budget goes to international work. International costs include funding the work of a dozen international partners and travel for activities aimed at building the global architecture for improving nuclear security (created the World Institute of Nuclear Security in Vienna; catalyzed the creation of a nuclear fuel bank at the International Atomic Energy Agency; supports an ongoing international forum on nuclear security; planning, improving global coordination, etc.).

NTI makes few traditional grants; instead it recruits partners to carry out specific projects it has designed. Most NTI grants resemble contracts for service, though it does award a small number of conventional grants. Grants and contracts to partner organizations constitute roughly 30% of NTI's budget.

Securing nuclear materials

NTI's chief focus is securing nuclear materials from falling into terrorist hands. It is very costly to manufacture nuclear materials such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium. These costs exceed what terrorists can afford. Therefore, preventing terrorists from acquiring nuclear materials requires securing state or industry-controlled nuclear materials against theft and/or sale on illegal markets. NTI advocates for stronger rules for securing nuclear materials.

NTI sometimes funds demonstration projects that get scaled up by governments. For example, with help from the U.S. government, NTI worked with Serbia to return non-secure nuclear materials to Russia. This effort led to the creation of a U.S. government program called the Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI) that works on similar projects. While NTI spent \$5 million on the initial program, it helped leverage well over \$3 billion on similar projects by GTRI over the past decade.

Global standards for securing nuclear materials

There is no global, enforceable standard for securing nuclear materials.

A series of nuclear summits, with more than 50 heads of state, have taken place over the past five years:

- The US hosted one in 2010
- South Korea hosted one in 2012
- The Hague hosted one in 2014

A fourth is scheduled for 2016 in the US, hosted by President Obama.

NTI is trying to use these summits to develop buy-in for global nuclear security standards. Though many states have attended the summits and made ad-hoc commitments, they have not developed common standards for securing nuclear materials. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) developed guidelines but they are not binding. Furthermore, the guidelines apply only to civil-sector materials (which constitute only 15% of the approximately 2000 metric tons of nuclear materials usable in weapons); IAEA's mandate

does not apply to nuclear material designated for military purposes or used by governments for research. A treaty called the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material contains principles for securing nuclear materials but applies only to a small subset of such materials and has not been ratified by every state.

NTI convened a series of three meetings of high-level government officials who would be leading their country's delegation at the Hague summit. The goal of these meetings was to add the development of global nuclear security standards to the Hague agenda. NTI spent about \$500,000 on this project, which it called "the Global Dialogue." It wrote and commissioned analysis for the meetings, led the meetings, and facilitated dialogue. The meetings yielded a framework for a global nuclear materials security system, and participating officials brought ideas from the meetings into the Hague summit process. The summit published a communiqué containing some of the key principles of this framework.

NTI recently published a statement, signed by 120 world leaders, aimed at influencing the agenda of a recent conference in Vienna. Three NTI representatives attended the conference.

Non-proliferation

NTI's second-largest focus in nuclear security is preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons to more states, and reducing the role of nuclear weapons globally. NTI played a leading role in the development of an opinion piece that sparked dialogue among governments about how to address the nuclear threat. The piece was co-authored by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn and was published in the Wall Street Journal in 2007. The piece continues to guide NTI's work and influenced President Obama in his goal to work toward "a world without nuclear weapons."

NTI also proposed a nuclear fuel bank to reduce the incentives for states to produce nuclear materials. Their proposal has been taken up by the IAEA. NTI pledged \$50 million to the fuel bank, raised another \$100 million for it in matching funds, and has helped the IAEA move the implementation process forward.

Biological threats

NTI's initial work on biological threats focused on building global capacity to respond to infectious disease outbreaks. NTI now works on outbreak prevention in addition to outbreak response.

NTI has improved global disease surveillance by developing regional information-sharing and capacity development networks. For example, prior to NTI's efforts, there was virtually no regular communication between the public health authorities in Palestine, Jordan, and Israel. To fill the gap, NTI helped establish the Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance, which developed standards for collecting information and a network for sharing information in real time. NTI has helped establish multiple regional networks

(in Africa, East Asia and Southern Europe) and a global network of these networks called Connecting Organizations for Regional Disease Surveillance.

Philanthropic opportunities in nuclear security

The nuclear security field has room for a new philanthropist. Despite a growing threat from nuclear weapons, available funding is decreasing because funders are exiting the field. A new philanthropist could consider funding opportunities other than U.S.-policy research, such as:

- Raising public awareness about the threat. In the absence of an informed citizenry, it is nearly impossible to achieve a sustained level of political engagement necessary for addressing the threat.
- Advocacy, possibly including grassroots advocacy, to turn policy into action.
- Organizing Track 1.5 meetings (government and non-government participants) and Track 2 meetings to bring new ideas into official discussions (only non-government participants).
- Congressional education about the threat from nuclear weapons (e.g. developing curricula about nuclear threats). The population in general, including Congress, is poorly informed about this threat, and we have lost critical capacity on these issues because many people with nuclear leadership expertise have retired.
- Pursuing a cultural strategy to change how people perceive the threat from nuclear weapons.
- Build up capacity in other countries through supporting think tanks, "do tanks," and academic research.
- Developing new global governance architectures. States cannot address nuclear threats unilaterally, and current global governance architecture is inadequate.

Shortcomings of current global institutions

Existing global institutions are not in a strong position to address the threats from weapons of mass destruction. Much of the work of the international organizations is done bilaterally with bureaucratic, institutional and budgetary constraints put on their ability to facilitate multinational or regional cooperation.

Much of NTI's work has and continues to be focused on closing global governance gaps that result from weaknesses in international organizations such as the World Health Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has rules forbidding it from sharing information among states, preventing it from developing the regional and global disease surveillance networks. NTI convened a regional forum in which participants agreed to share surveillance information. WHO is now a collaborator in these new regional networks and disease surveillance information is now shared with the WHO as a separate product. While many may ask if this is not the responsibility of international organizations, in practice international organizations do not regularly operate in this manner.

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