

U.S. to Fund Russian Nuclear Security Despite Ukraine Sanctions

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The Energy Department plans to spend more than \$60 million in Russia for nuclear security activities at the same time U.S. and European Union sanctions are punishing Moscow for aggression against Ukraine.

The Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which is in charge of nuclear arms and nuclear security, has budgeted the funds to be spent this year through an international organization called the Multilateral Nuclear Environmental Program in Russia (MNEPR), a little-known group, said administration officials familiar with the funding plan.

It is not clear how the funds will be used. One official said talks between U.S. and Russian officials were held earlier this year regarding a program to remove nuclear material dumped in the Arctic Ocean by the Russians as waste fuel. A second official said the funds would be used for an array of talks and other "feel good" measures on nuclear nonproliferation with the Russians.

Derrick J. Robinson, a NNSA spokesman, declined to answer questions about the funding plan, suggesting details about it are classified. But he did not dispute that NNSA money would be spent on the security of Russian nuclear materials.

"Cooperation with Russia on nuclear security remains an important element to the global effort to reduce the threat posed by nuclear terrorism, and therefore, supports key interests of not only the United States but the international community," Robinson said in a statement.

"We have long worked with Russia to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by securing and eliminating WMD-related materials and technology," he added.

Russia in January canceled its role in the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, also known as the Nunn-Lugar program, which since the 1990s spent millions of dollars in a bid to secure nuclear materials in Russia after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. Moscow announced it no longer would receive U.S. funds from the program that was administered by the Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

However, arms control activists within the Obama administration sought to continue the program by shifting to the MNEPR. The officials include the administration's main advocate for arms control talks with Russia, Under Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller.

A State Department official said MNEPR activities are not related to Ukraine sanctions imposed on Moscow.

"We note that while there is a significant reduction in the scope of our joint work under MNEPR, there are several areas where cooperation will continue," the official said. "Even before the crisis in Ukraine, the United States and Russia were working to transition nuclear security engagement from one of assistance to one of partnership."

A spokeswoman for MNEPR did not return emails seeking comment.

The administration officials told the *Free Beacon* there are concerns within the administration that Russia will divert the funds to help mitigate the impact of the [economic sanctions](#), or that the money will be misused in other ways.

Former Pentagon official Eric Edelman agreed. The cooperative threat reduction program made sense after the Soviet collapse, but Russia is no longer a poor country and has oil revenues that can be used to pay for securing its own material, he said in an interview.

"The idea that they're securing nuclear materials as a favor to us is absurd," said Edelman, a former under secretary of defense for policy. "Since money is fungible, by continuing to fund these programs we are in effect having U.S. taxpayers subsidize Russia's nuclear buildup."

Russia is currently engaged in a major buildup of its strategic nuclear forces that include several new missile systems, new submarines, and a new strategic bomber. Moscow also has threatened to deploy nuclear missiles in occupied Crimea.

The House will debate legislation this week that includes provisions that would restrict U.S. funding for nuclear non-proliferation programs in Russia.

Rep. Jim Bridenstine, (R., Okla.) said he will seek to bolster the legislation.

"Vladimir Putin apparently has millions of rubles to finance an invasion of Crimea, to destabilize Ukraine, to intimidate our NATO allies, and to build up his nuclear weapons," Bridenstine told the *Free Beacon*.

"Rather than further subsidize Russia's nuclear weapons modernization, the United States should insist that Russia fund its nonproliferation obligations," he added.

Bridenstine said he supports the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill language that would prohibit U.S. assistance to Russia. "And I will be offering an amendment to strengthen the underlying bill in this regard," he said.

The current defense bill language contains a provision that bars all funding for nuclear nonproliferation activities and assistance in Russia. However, the provision allows the energy secretary to waive the curb.

John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, also criticized the plans to fund Russian nuclear security programs.

"Russia has consistently sought to divert funds from destroying [weapons of mass destruction] or related efforts to projects with a higher priority to Moscow," said Bolton, also a former undersecretary of state for arms control. "Especially in light of the Ukraine situation, the White House should be insisting on the strictest accountability and transparency before any U.S. funds are expended."

Phillip Karber, a Georgetown University professor and specialist on Ukraine called the NNSA funding plan "crazy."

"It undermines western sanctions — how can we argue Europeans need to hang tough on sanctions when we are subsidizing the wrong people in Russia?" Karber said.

Disclosure of the NNSA funding plan comes as senior military and defense officials in recent weeks voiced new fears of Russian threats and aggression in eastern Europe.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter told a Senate hearing on Wednesday that Russia appears to be preparing for new violations of the ceasefire with Ukraine by preparing for new military action in the eastern part of the country.

Carter said European sanctions on Russia are having an impact on Moscow's economy.

"If there is anything that will influence Russian behavior, it is the combination of economic sanctions and the fall in oil prices," Carter told the Senate defense appropriations subcommittee. "That is what is punishing Russia now."

Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who appeared with Carter, also sounded alarms about the new Russian threat.

Dempsey said Moscow's coercive and destabilizing actions "have threatened NATO's eastern flank."

"Russia is investing deeply in advancing their capabilities across the board, especially in anti-access area-denial and cyberspace," Dempsey said.

Gen. Philip Breedlove, commander of the U.S. European Command and NATO commander, was more emphatic on April 30 when he told a Senate hearing that Russia has emerged as a major new security threat to Europe.

Breedlove, in Senate testimony, called for an immediate halt in all U.S. troops reductions in Europe as a result of threatening Russian actions in Ukraine and elsewhere.

"Russia is blatantly attempting to change the rules and principles that have been the foundation of

European security for decades," Breedlove told reporters at the Pentagon after his Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. "The challenge posed by a resurgent Russia is global, not regional, and enduring, not temporary."

A spokesman for Breedlove declined to comment on the Russian nuclear security funding, stating, "this is an Energy Department and U.S. government decision."

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