

A uranium bank just opened in Kazakhstan to stop the spread of nukes

By David Filipov and Joby Warrick

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Arms control advocates Tuesday celebrated the opening of an internationally supported repository for nuclear reactor fuel that its backers believe will dissuade countries interested in nuclear power from developing the capability to make atomic weapons.

Enriching uranium, the technology that produces fuel for a nuclear power plant, is also the process for creating a nuclear bomb, meaning that the risk of proliferation spreads when individual countries build their own fuel-making facilities.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's low-enriched uranium bank, opened Tuesday in Kazakhstan, is the culmination of a [years-long](#) effort to respond to this risk. The agency, which will run the "bank" independently

of any country, will purchase and store low-enriched uranium, fuel for civilian reactors but not an ingredient for nuclear weapons.

The uranium repository is also a rare bright spot in the rocky U.S.-Russian relationship. Russia is a leading global supplier of uranium to the nuclear power industry, and has its own uranium repository. Moscow was initially cool to the idea of an independently run uranium bank that might be seen as a competitor. Ultimately, however, Moscow agreed to support the project. Both Russian and China granted transit rights for uranium fuel being shipped to and from the Kazakh facility.

“Russia played an absolutely critical role in negotiating a transit agreement,” said [Andrew Bieniawski](#), who oversees projects related to the security and minimization of nuclear materials for [Nuclear Threat Initiative](#). The Washington-based non-profit provided the initial funding for the bank courtesy of a \$50 million investment from American billionaire investor Warren Buffett.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who attended Tuesday’s ceremony, hailed the project as “an important element of the international effort not just in nonproliferation but also in the sphere of expansion of the countries that are putting nuclear energy to good use.”

“In some ways it’s a direct derivative of long-standing U.S.-Russian cooperation on these issues,” Ryabkov said.

Those efforts have largely dried up following Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Other than the notable exception of the Iran nuclear deal, U.S.-Russian programs intended to stop the spread of nuclear weapons materials and negotiations on limiting the two sides’ nuclear arsenals have ground to a halt.

“There are a lot more opportunities that are going unaddressed because of the current situation,” said [Ernest J. Moniz](#), co-chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative and secretary of energy during President Obama’s second term.

Moniz said the two sides could be working on nonproliferation issues despite the chilly relationship. The Nuclear Threat Initiative and the Moscow-based [Center for Energy and Security Studies](#) earlier this year compiled a [catalogue](#) of dozens of possible U.S.-Russian projects in nuclear cooperation.

Arms-control advocates have expressed hope that the Trump administration’s modest support for the uranium bank will signal a willingness to invest in other nuclear nonproliferation initiatives.

U.S. backing for the uranium bank includes nearly \$50 million in federal financial support pledged by the administration of George W. Bush, which, like the Obama White House, embraced the bank concept with enthusiasm. The Trump administration signed off on the U.S. aid package, but did not send a high-level delegation to the ceremony in Kazakhstan.

The White House’s early budget proposals have called for cuts in funding for international nonproliferation programs, and President Trump’s campaign speeches at times advocated expanding the U.S. nuclear arsenal while also suggesting that more countries should develop nuclear weapons.

Shortly after taking office, the administration launched a comprehensive review of U.S. nuclear weapons policy, with results expected to be announced as early as this fall.

The Trump White House has “not yet put forward a coherent philosophy about how they will address one of the president’s greatest responsibilities,” said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, a

Washington nonprofit that advocates increased efforts to safeguard or eliminate weapons of mass destruction. “I am quite concerned about our ability to provide the necessary leadership to advance constructive ideas to reduce risk.”

Other donors include Norway, the United Arab Emirates, the more than two dozen countries in the European Union, Kuwait, and Kazakhstan.

“The bank will play an important role in reducing nuclear dangers and serve as a vivid example of the benefits of international cooperation at a time when our world is in a race between cooperation and catastrophe,” said former U.S. senator [Sam Nunn](#), co-chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, in a packed auditorium in Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana.

The ceremony took place on the 26th anniversary of Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s decision to shut one of the Soviet Union’s two major nuclear test sites, in [Semipalatinsk](#). In 1995, Kazakhstan turned over to Russia the 1,410 strategic nuclear warheads the Soviets had stationed on its territory, as well as an undisclosed number of short-range nuclear weapons.

“The will of the people of Kazakhstan was stronger than the Cold War,” Nazarbayev said at Tuesday’s ceremony.

The audience, which included officials from nations that donated to the project, was shown a video feed from the new bank in Ust-Kamenogorsk, about 600 miles of largely empty steppe east of Astana. The glistening repository was empty except for circular white racks that will hold the fuel.

Eventually, the bank will hold 90 metric tons of low enriched uranium, enough to produce fuel to power a large city for up to three years.

Low-enriched uranium fuel will be purchased on the market from a commercial supplier and stored in the Kazakh repository until needed.

Countries applying to receive the fuel would be required to pay the market rate.

The bank essentially guarantees that fuel for nuclear power plants will be available, in the case of future disruptions to global uranium markets, to member states of the IAEA who are in good standing with their nonproliferation obligations.

“It gives countries the kind of assurances they need to not rely on their own enrichment,” Nunn said in an interview before the ceremony.

It’s also intended to make governments resist the temptation to build their own factories to make enriched uranium.

“Countries would have to justify to their own citizens why they were spending money to go into their own enrichment with a small nuclear program,” Nunn said in an interview.

While 31 countries around the world [operate nuclear power plants](#), only 14 produce their own nuclear fuel. The others purchase low-enriched uranium from a handful of international suppliers, mainly in Russia, the United States and Europe. More than 40 countries are actively planning or considering new nuclear power plants to meet help meet growing energy demands, according to the [World Nuclear Association](#). The list includes wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia and Singapore as well as developing African countries such as Tanzania and Ghana.

While the commercial uranium market is more than adequate to meet the growing demand, some countries could be tempted to manufacture their own enriched uranium as a hedge against future disruptions to the global supply caused by war or political crises. Iran cited concerns over market disruptions as the primary reason for constructing its massive Natanz uranium enrichment plant.