



Center for International Trade and Security

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Nuclear Security Culture, Twenty Years On

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If politics lies downstream of culture in everyday life, bureaucratic politics lies downstream of the ambient culture in any institution. An institution is apt to fail without the right policies, rules and procedures, equipment, and people in place. After all, organizations are groups of people. Leadership molds how the people constituting an organization view the operating environment around them, react to it, and try to fulfill their missions within it. But this is not a static process. It is up to senior leadership to reform the culture when the times and circumstances change around the institution—as they will—to help it keep pace with change. Dynamism prevails in successful organizations.

Cultural stewardship is the foremost duty for the leadership of any institution, whether it's the University of Georgia, SpaceX, or the Pentagon.

That applies just as much to nuclear power plants, medical research centers, or any other facility that handles materials that could be used to manufacture nuclear or radiological weapons. The repercussions of an ill-trained or lackadaisical workforce could be grave. By contrast a culture hospitable to security bends the staff's worldview and ultimately its performance toward technical excellence, vigilance, and preparedness. Cultural upkeep and renovation boost the likelihood that the institution will achieve its goal of safeguarding doomsday matériel from rogue governments, terror groups, or other malefactors intent on doing harm.

That the human factor is indispensable to security is the core insight that has propelled research into “nuclear security culture” for the past two decades. The initiative got its start at the University of Geor-

gia Center for International Trade & Security (CITS) not long after the 9/11 terror attacks on New York and Washington DC. The U.S. government, armed forces, and society dreaded the prospect that al Qaeda or some kindred group might obtain the makings of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons or radiological dirty bombs and use them to sow fresh havoc for the United States and the world.

Hence the imperative to stiffen defenses at sites housing dangerous materials. Tightening a defensive posture involves equipment, to be sure. Facilities need everything from humdrum precautions like fences and locks to high-tech material protection, control, and accounting systems to track minute amounts of radioactive substances. But fancy hardware is not enough. After all, the finest equipment is no better than its user. In the security realm, only a skilled user who takes the threat seriously and is resolute about defeating it can wring maximum design performance out of a piece of kit.

Security-mindedness must be a matter of habit. It must come as second nature. People are bundles of habits, and shaping habits and attitudes among the workforce is a key function of leadership. If it is habitual among staff members to remain watchful and act decisively when an incident happens, the organization is primed for success. If not, its defenses against insider and external threats will falter and proliferation may well occur. Turning the human factor to advantage, then, is a matter of no small consequence for national and international security.

So that's my brief on behalf of nuclear security culture. For much more on the theory and practice of security culture in a specific country, in this case post-Cold War Russia, take a gander at our old CITS monograph on *Nuclear Security Culture: The Case of Russia* (2004), and for more on the importance of habits in human affairs and how to instill them, have a look at the early chapters of my *Habits of Highly Effective Maritime Strategists* (2021), which seems

to be available online through the UGA library system. For free!

It is worth pointing out that precepts from nuclear security culture have also found their way into the fields of biological and chemical security over the years. That's good. If an attentive, security-conscious workforce is a must in the nuclear domain, it is likewise a must in any other domain that could furnish some foe with the building-blocks of unconventional arms. Biological and chemical weapons too represent hazards of immense magnitude.

I hope enterprising students, staff, and faculty at the University of Georgia will carry this important work forward. And the rising generation in Athens is an obvious candidate to take on this endeavor.

That's because—speaking of changing a culture—the Center stood at the forefront of transforming how governments and the international community approach nuclear security. The security-culture initiative was the brainchild of Dr. Igor Khripunov, then the second-in-charge at the Center, currently a CITS Distinguished Fellow, and the coauthor (with yours truly) of a chapter titled “Nuclear Security Culture” in the hot-off-the-presses Oxford University Press Handbook of Nuclear Security.

I relate this history not just because it belongs in the Center's institutional memory but because the project is testament to how one individual toiling on a college campus can make a difference in the world of practical affairs through insight and sheer perseverance. The security-culture team scattered to other pursuits over the years, but Igor constantly pushed his ideas in such forums as the G-8 Nuclear Security Summits, one of which gathered at Sea Island, Georgia, in 2004; countless gatherings convened by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); and assist visits to nuclear-related installations across the globe.

So persuasive and so plain dogged was Igor's campaign that his research findings and recom-

mendations were ultimately transcribed into official IAEA strategic guidance for governments and site managers looking to upgrade security measures within their nuclear complexes.

From academic research to practice: now that's making a difference.

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