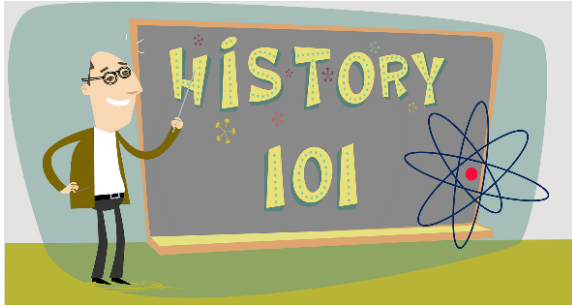


Melting Ice with the Peaceful Atom: The NRC and the End of the Cold War



Despite not seeing eye-to-eye on many matters, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, nevertheless, continued to exchange information about nuclear reactor safety even during the Cold War. Then the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and the information exchanges stopped. It wasn't until the 1985 Reagan-Gorbachev summit that discussions were restarted.

After productive meetings with U.S. nuclear safety experts shortly after the Chernobyl nuclear accident in April 1986, Soviet expert Anfronik Petrosyants noted: "We hope we have broken the ice of mistrust." It appeared something good for reactor safety and Cold War relations might come from the disaster.

A year and a half later the initial talks bore fruit. On the second anniversary of Chernobyl, NRC Chairman Lando Zech met with his Soviet counterpart for a signing ceremony at the U.S. State Department establishing a joint coordinating committee of U.S. and Soviet experts to share information on nuclear safety issues. It was an important moment for the world. As Hans Blix, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, observed: "a radiation cloud doesn't know international boundaries."

But it was an uneasy relationship. Both sides entered negotiations with trepidation born of a long Cold War. In March 1987, an NRC safety team led by Commissioner Frederick Bernthal toured Soviet facilities, including two undamaged reactors at Chernobyl. The delegation reported that Soviet experts were not eager to discuss the possibility of formal cooperation with the U.S. on safety matters. They only agreed to further talks.

At home, some U.S. officials suspected the negotiations were a trap. Carol Kessler, an NRC and State Department staffer, recalled strong opposition to the NRC initiative from military representatives. An officer, she recalled, "stood up on a chair in [an] inter-agency meeting and explained to us how w're all ruining the lives of our grandchildren [by negotiating with the Soviets]."

Nevertheless, negotiations gained momentum with support from President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. In December 1987, the two leaders jointly called for a bilateral agreement on reactor safety. The memorandum was signed just four months later. It created 10 working groups to work on safety regulation, operations, research, and radiation protection. Similar agreements quickly followed with other Soviet-bloc nations.

The Soviet memorandum marked a key shift for the NRC in international affairs that outlived the fall of communism. Surrounded by reactors that did not meet Western safety standards and bereft of regulatory agencies like the NRC, former communist countries desperately needed assistance. The bilateral agreements allowed the agency to become an ambassador among them advocating that they establish Western safety standards and regulations.

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