

Lost in Translation: Addressing Semantic Challenges in Nuclear Security Discourse across Languages

At international events on nuclear security, it is a near inevitability that, at some point, proceedings will grind to a halt as participants struggle to grasp or articulate the concept of “nuclear security” itself. This should pose little surprise: many languages - including four of the six official languages of the United Nations - use the same word to denote both “safety” and “security.” After decades of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) efforts to promote nuclear safety and, more recently, to bring security to a level on par with safety, the risk of confusion in this area remains rife. Unfortunately, the consequences of such confusion for perception, policy, and practice can be quite real, and have likely confounded efforts to promote nuclear security since their inception. To take an example, one of the most widely accepted and used official terms for “security” in Russian, физическая защита (fizicheskaja zashchita - physical protection), suggests a stark emphasis on outsider-adversary-oriented physical measures, rather than on areas such as culture, insider threat, policy and administration, and sustainability. And indeed, these different areas of emphasis tended to characterize U.S. and Russian efforts to cooperate directly on nuclear security, and their respective management of security in their own nuclear complexes. This paper will survey common translations and usages of the term “nuclear security” and key related concepts in several of the United Nations official languages (Russian, Chinese, and French) to identify pronounced semantic shortfalls and traps, and their potential consequences. The authors will then offer recommendations on how to address these, both in the initial choice of words in English and in translation. It is our hope that this work can serve as a reference for drafters, translators and interpreters, and can help augment the IAEA’s ongoing efforts to build an authoritative nuclear security glossary to facilitate the articulation and adoption of international nuclear security best practices.

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