

The IAEA at 60

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In September the 60th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) took place in Vienna. The oldest and largest international organization based in Austria has gained wider international prominence mainly through its role in the negotiations surrounding Iran's nuclear program. Yet while these P5+1 talks spread the name of the IAEA, the organization itself and the wide scope of its duties remain largely unknown. The Vienna [IAEA History Research Project](#) is dedicated to the history of this important international organization. Founded in 1957 through an uncommonly productive collaboration by the US and Soviet governments, the IAEA has weathered crises including the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear disasters as well as the end of the Cold War.

The histories of international organizations are commonly judged according to the part these organizations play in today's world. In the IAEA's case, that could be a deceptive approach. Today it is known primarily for its global inspection and monitoring regime, the IAEA Safeguards, which confirm that signatory states to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) live up to their commitments. In the early years of the IAEA, however, it was civilian uses of nuclear technology – in medicine, agriculture and energy – that generated the most interest.



That was especially the case among [states in the so-called Third World](#), which sought the support of the IAEA in developing civilian programs. A 1957 Walt Disney film coining the slogan "Our Friend the Atom" epitomized the period's faith in progress. The IAEA Safeguards, on the other hand, were regarded far less positively and considered by many members as interference in the affairs of sovereign states. To this day, the rivalry between monitoring and support activities is reflected in an annual tug-of-war over the Agency's budget.

From the start, debate has swirled over whether the founding of the IAEA has not actually helped spread the military use of nuclear power. In a speech at the United Nations in New York in December 1953, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower recommended the founding of an international nuclear agency. He assumed that actively promoting civilian uses of nuclear technology would restrict its military proliferation. After the mid-1950s, however, when uranium deposits were discovered around the world – it had previously been assumed that uranium was a rare commodity – this thinking became untenable.

The Austrian fund for science, the FWF, is promoting a multi-year research project to comprehensively investigate the [founding history of the IAEA](#) in its global dimension. The story of the Agency's founding is indeed marked both by East-West and North-South dynamics. During the four years of negotiations that preceded its establishment, the newly independent states of the world fought to prevent the organization from perpetuating international power structures inherited from the age of imperialism. Whereas collaboration between East and West in these



talks often proved surprisingly good, the industrialized states and the future recipients of IAEA support programs frequently dealt with each other as rivals.

Another project seeks to make aspects of the IAEA that either have no written sources or whose sources are currently unavailable due to archival restrictions accessible to research through oral history interviews. With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Austrian National Bank's Jubiläumsfond, nearly 20 interviews have been conducted, including with the former Directors General Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei. The interviews can be viewed online: <http://iaea-history.univie.ac.at/oral-history-videos/>.

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