

Influencers

ADVOCACY GROUPS

‘Rock Star’ Physicist Remains at Forefront

By MIKE MAGNER

Members of President Barack Obama’s Cabinet scattered far and wide after Donald Trump moved into the White House on Jan. 20. Not so Ernest Moniz, the nuclear physicist who was secretary of Energy for most of Obama’s second term.

On June 1, Moniz took charge at the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a nongovernmental group based in Washington seeking to reduce the perils of nuclear and biological weapons. It is in many ways a continuation of Moniz’s work at the Energy Department, the federal overseer of all things nuclear: energy, research, weaponry and waste disposal.

The Nuclear Threat Initiative’s new CEO and co-chairman of its board of directors believes that the job is a good fit for him.

“I was planning all along to share my time post-DOE on nuclear security and on energy and climate,” Moniz says. The Nuclear Threat Initiative is clearly focused on the former and on June 21 Moniz plans to announce a new initiative encouraging innovation in energy systems worldwide. He also is a part-time professor of physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Nuclear Threat Initiative was formed in 2001

at the time of the worst terrorism event in U.S. history. Media mogul Ted Turner donated the funding and a former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Democrat Sam Nunn of Georgia, provided leadership and expertise.

Over the years the Nuclear Threat Initiative and its team of experts worked hand-in-hand with two administrations on reducing the threat from nu-

clear weapons. It inspired the Energy Department under President George W. Bush to work closely with Russia on removing and replacing weapons-grade materials — highly enriched uranium and plutonium — from nuclear facilities around the world so they would not fall into the wrong hands. And it played an active role in Barack Obama’s expressed mission to rid the world of nuclear arma-

ments.

Moniz was a key player in those efforts as Energy secretary from May 2013 to January 2017. He helped negotiate the international agreement blocking Iran from developing nuclear weapons. He worked with Chinese officials to establish a Center of Excellence on Nuclear Security near Beijing and he organized a series of global summits on reducing nuclear threats.

“I think the nuclear-weapons-free world remains the right goal,” Moniz says. “But I’d remind you that President Obama also said quite correctly that he wasn’t anticipating that happening in his lifetime. So it’s a multi-decade issue, probably as long from here to there as it’s been from World War II to here. Who knows?”

The goal seems further out of reach with relations between the United States and Russia at the lowest point since the Cold War, but Moniz remains hopeful.

“Certainly these issues of election tampering and so on are extraordinary,” he says. “But in the height of the Cold War we still maintained the essential security communications that were there to avoid something worse happening.”

Moniz notes that even after the U.S. imposed sanctions on Russia after its 2014 seizure of Crimea in Ukraine, “Russia was a very good partner in the Iran negotiations. ... So I think when there are aligned interests that we both see as in our interests in terms of proliferation, I believe we can still cooperate.”

Nunn, who remains co-chairman of the Nuclear



ERNEST MONIZ: Focusing on nuclear threats, global energy issues.

Bill Clark/CO Roll Call

Threat Initiative board but has turned over the role of CEO to Moniz, was ecstatic when he announced the arrangement in March. “Among many other accomplishments, he played a pivotal role in the successful conclusion of the Iran agreement,” Nunn said. “Ernie is an outstanding leader and a brilliant thinker, who is respected around the globe.”

The sentiment was echoed by Alexandra Bell, senior policy director at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation and a former State Department official.

“It is not every day that a physicist becomes a rock star, but Ernest Moniz earned that title,” Bell said in an email. “He is respected by people in and out of the government and across party lines. His combination of technical and political savvy was a direct factor in achieving the success of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. The entire arms control community is thrilled to have him in the fight.”

A starting point for Moniz’s



FULL OF ENERGY: Moniz with Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., in 2015.

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

work is the list of 51 recommendations for “mutually beneficial cooperation” with Russia, part of a joint report issued in February by the institute and the Moscow-based Center for Energy and Security Studies. That includes “keeping nuclear weapons or materials out of the hands of ISIS, which is a shared objective,” Moniz says.

One high priority will be encouraging an aggressive response to the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, Moniz says. “That has to be addressed,” he says. “We want to have strong discussion here on what we can

do in that debate.”

The discussion should not be limited to North Korea’s weapons program, but should address the security needs on the entire Korean Peninsula and in the region around it and what role the U.S. military should play, he says. And if some type of agreement can be worked out, he says, it must include “extraordinary verification measures.”

Efforts to prevent a terrorist attack with radioactive materials — a so-called dirty bomb — are also on Moniz’s agenda. Such an attack might not cause any deaths, “but there would be economic

devastation: blocks might be quarantined for 20 years,” he says.

Another top concern is the 850 irradiators in the U.S. — mostly used to treat blood before transfusions — that contain a powdered form of cesium that could be used to make a dirty bomb. Moniz says the Nuclear Threat Initiative is working with all the hospitals in New York City to replace cesium irradiators with alternative devices that are just as effective, and that effort will be expanded to other cities.

The Nuclear Threat Initiative has also hired Beth Cameron, previously the senior director for global health security and biodefense on the White House National Security Council staff, to focus on the threat of biological weapons.

“We’re going to look at how we can ramp up there,” Moniz says. “Perhaps start a threat index on how countries are prepared or not. We also want to look hard at assessing the risks and how they can be addressed with new technology development.” ■

IN BRIEF

• **Michael Bahar**, the Democrats’ staff director and general counsel at the House Intelligence Committee, has left for law firm Eversheds Sutherland. Bahar’s deputy, Timothy Bergrgreen, is the new staff director for ranking Democrat Adam B. Schiff of California.



• **Blaine Nolan**, previously director of scheduling for Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, is now deputy chief of staff at Prime Policy Group, a



lobbying firm.

• **Theodore Alexander**, who was New York GOP Rep. Chris Collins’ legislative director, is now a summer associate at the law firm McDermott Will & Emery.



• **Alex Burgos** is now the vice president of federal policy, government relations and communications at TechNet, a trade association for technology companies. He was previously deputy chief of staff and communications director for GOP Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida.

• **Kari Bingen**, previously a professional staff member at the

House Armed Services Committee under its GOP chairman, Mac Thornberry of Texas, now works at the Defense Department as principal undersecretary for intelligence.

• **Matthew Herrmann** has joined the Roosevelt Group, a lobbying firm. He was previously chief of staff to Madeleine Z. Bordallo, the Democratic delegate to Congress from Guam.

• **Dale Oak**, a senior adviser to the House Appropriations Committee chairman, New Jersey Republican Rodney Frelinghuysen, has retired.



• **Wills Denton** has joined the CME Group. He was previously legislative director for GOP Rep. David Rouzer of North Carolina.



• **Vince Zito** is now working in corporate communications at SunTrust Bank. He was previously communications director for GOP Rep. Roger Williams of Texas.



• **Erin Perrine** is now House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy’s press secretary. She previously held the same position for the Senate Republican Conference.