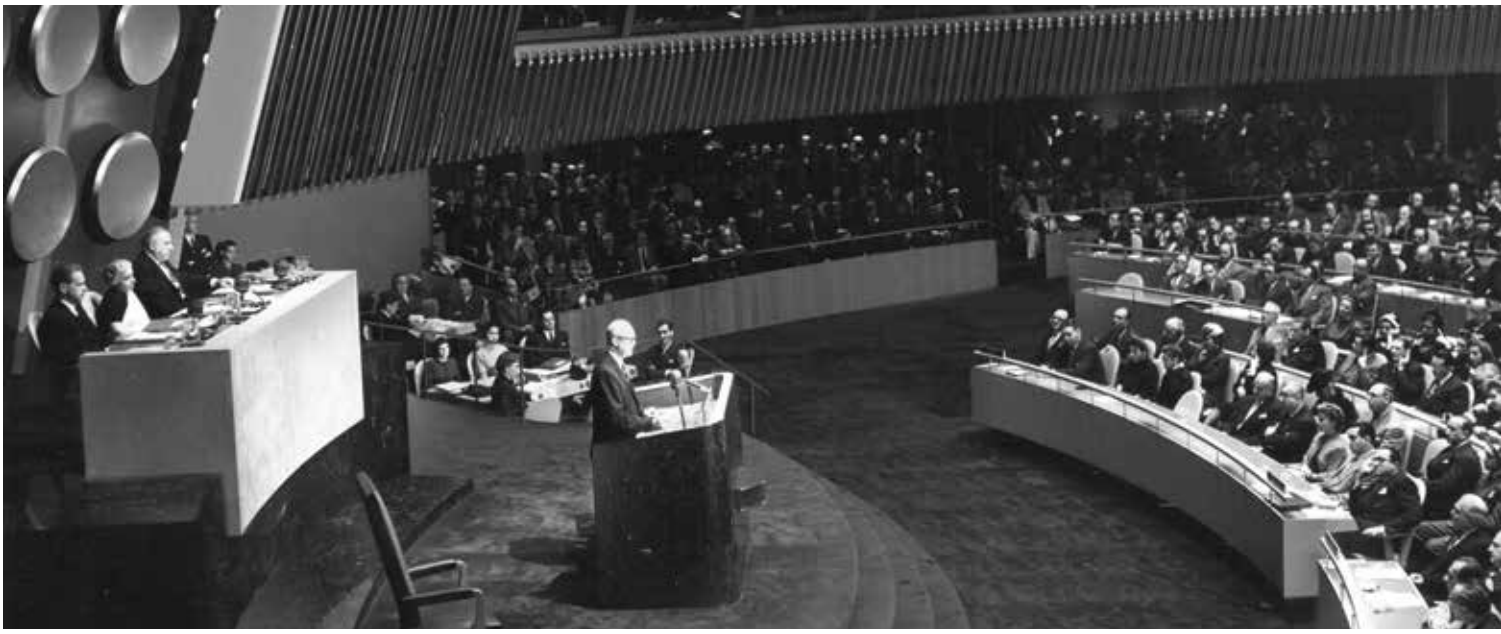
EISENHOWER'S ATOMS FOR PEACE

The Speech that Inspired the Creation of the IAEA



President Eisenhower gives his famous Atoms for Peace Speech to the United Nations General Assembly (8 December 1953). (Photo: UN)

Sixty years ago, on 8 December 1953, US President Eisenhower delivered his historic "Atoms for Peace" address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The Cold War and the nuclear arms race were the background for the President's speech. However, instead of solely focusing on the perils of atomic war, Eisenhower lauded the civilian nuclear applications in agriculture, medicine, and power generation. He proposed the establishment of an "international atomic energy agency" that would promote the peaceful uses of nuclear energy "for the benefit of all mankind."

In October 1957, Eisenhower's vision became reality. From today's perspective, it is striking that during a tense period of the Cold War international agreement on nuclear matters was reached within only four years.

The Genesis of Eisenhower's Speech

When President Eisenhower decided in 1953 to deliver a major speech on nuclear issues, he initially planned to talk about nuclear fears rather than about nuclear hopes. The speech's original concept traced back to the report of the "Oppenheimer Panel", a committee formed by Eisenhower's predecessor, Harry S. Truman, and named after its most distinguished member, Robert Oppenheimer. In view of the nuclear arms race, the panel recommended that the American public receive a fuller picture of the threat and about national defence plans. The proposal resulted in a public information campaign, "Operation Candor," that foresaw a major presidential speech.

However, during the several months of drafting, the speech's emphasis slowly changed from the initial idea of "candor" to the later "Atoms for Peace" concept. As historian Ira Chernus explains, "the focus shifted steadily away from the American-Soviet rivalry to this new perspective of humanity versus weaponry."* The specific proposal to establish an International Atomic Energy Agency appeared late in the drafting phase and was Eisenhower's own initiative.

Eisenhower specifically addressed the developing countries. Nuclear energy was presented as a means to advance progress and welfare throughout the world.

While the President's proposal met approval and scepticism alike, his speech laid the foundation for an international nuclear order that still shapes our world today.

Difficult Beginnings: the Early Negotiations

In his speech, Eisenhower expressed his desire to open a new channel for peaceful

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Ira Chernus, Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace (Texas A&M University Press: College Station, 2002).

discussion between the superpowers and called for the Soviet Union's involvement in the establishment of the new atomic energy organization. To underline the earnestness of this aim, Charles E. Bohlen, the American Ambassador to Moscow, briefed Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov about the President's UN speech a day in advance.

In the months following the speech, the two governments exchanged views on the Agency's creation on a bilateral basis. But the Soviet Union initially remained sceptical vis-à-vis the American proposal. The United States pursued discussions on the IAEA's creation with Canada and the United Kingdom as well as Australia, Belgium, France, Portugal, and South Africa. During the discussion, a first draft of the new agency's statute was produced, using Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace speech as a guideline.

A Global Endeavour: the Group of Negotiators Expands

Although the actual negotiations did not take place within a United Nations framework, the UN General Assembly of 1954 welcomed and endorsed the work of the negotiating states. It also called for an international conference on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. In August 1955, this conference took place at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, the largest meeting of scientists the world had seen to that date. For the first time after the end of the Second World War the veil of nuclear secrecy was partially lifted and physicists from East and West began to re-establish scientific exchange.

After the conference, the IAEA negotiating group expanded to include Brazil, Czechoslovakia, India, and the Soviet Union. With the exception of Czechoslovakia, scientists from these countries had already been members of the Geneva Conference's organizational committee. In early 1956, the twelve-nation group met in Washington, DC to revise the draft of the agency's statute. The other UN member states had been given the opportunity to send their comments.

As archival evidence tells us, an outstanding feature of the meetings was the atmosphere of cooperation. In fact, the meetings foreshadowed much of the "spirit of Vienna," which later became proverbial. In October 1956, the twelve-nation group presented the draft statute to 82 nations at a conference at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. As American delegate James J. Wadsworth recalled, it was "the largest international gathering in history up to that time." *

The Conference of the Statute ended on 26 October 1956 and the statute was opened for signature. A Preparatory Commission took up its work to arrange the first general conference of the new organization. On 29 July 1957, the statute came into force.

Vienna Becomes "the World's Centre of the Atom"

The negotiations also dealt with the site of the IAEA's headquarters. Suggested locations included, amongst others, Copenhagen, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, and Vienna. Given the prevailing Cold War tensions, the suggestion to host the IAEA in a neutral state found support from several states. The Austrian government was thrilled by the suggestion to establish the new organization in Vienna. The country regained its independence in 1955, after ten years of four-power occupation. Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace speech had referred to Austria as a crucial example for Cold War conflicts. In the eyes of the Austrian government, to host an important international organization could provide opportunities to find a new role in international relations. One of the early supporters of an Austrian location was also India, whose prominent nuclear physicist Homi Bhabha admired the city's cultural and musical life.

In October 1957, the first IAEA General Conference took place in Vienna, and the city was chosen as the location of the new organization's permanent headquarters. When the first IAEA General Conference convened, the renowned Austrian journalist Hugo Portisch declared that Vienna had become "the world's centre of the atom."** With the IAEA's establishment, the way was paved for Vienna's role as a centre of international organizations.

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*James J. Wadsworth, "Modern Diplomacy: Atoms for Peace," in John G. Stoessinger and Alan F. Westin, eds., Power and Order: 6 Cases in World Politics (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1964), pp. 33-65, here: p. 48.

**Hugo Portisch, "In den Mauern unserer Stadt," *Kurier*, 1.10.1957.