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19

The Nuclear Security Summit will leave unfinished work

Miles A. Pomper

Laura Holgate, the US envoy to the Nuclear Security Summit, likes to compare the series of biannual meetings initiated by President Barack Obama in 2010 to a “sprint in the middle of a marathon.” The metaphor is an apt one. Like sprinters, summit participants moved quickly to achieve some concrete accomplishments, departing from the usual languid pace of multilateral diplomacy. Yet the need for short-term, demonstrable results appears to have exhausted the states involved. At the fourth and final summit beginning March 31, they will bring the process to an end, stopping well short of the ultimate finish line: a point where all high-risk nuclear and radiological materials and facilities are rigorously protected from theft or sabotage. As a result, it will largely fall to the next US president and the rest of the international community to muster a second wind and sufficient stamina to finish the race.

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When Obama came to office, he sought to build on past nuclear security efforts, particularly those of President George W. Bush. After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration led international efforts to negotiate two nuclear security accords—a 2005 amendment to the Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM), and the International Convention for the Suppression of Nuclear Terrorism (ICSANT). The former for the first time required states party to provide appropriate physical protection of nuclear materials on their own territory. The latter facilitated prosecutions and extraditions related to nuclear terrorism. The Bush administration also ramped up spending to secure or remove dangerous materials from civil use—particularly highly enriched uranium (HEU), viewed by many experts as the fissile material terrorists might most easily use in a nuclear device. A particular Bush success was working with Russia to extend such efforts to other former Eastern Bloc states.

In an April 2009 speech in Prague, Obama called nuclear terrorism “the most immediate and extreme threat to global security” and announced “a new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years.” Inviting nearly 50 world leaders to the first summit a year later, Obama brought a new level of visibility and the prestige of his office to the ongoing effort, clearing political roadblocks that had sometimes lingered for years. For instance, the United States had for nearly two decades been seeking to remove more than 200 kilograms of HEU from Ukraine, enough for about half a dozen nuclear weapons. The political leverage provided by the summit process allowed Obama to wrest a pledge from Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich at the 2010 summit to remove the material to Russia—a process that was completed in 2012.

The Ukraine commitment resulted in part from a procedural innovation developed for the summit process. In the run-up to the 2010 summit, Obama's team asked summit participants—like dinner party guests—to each bring a “house gift” when they showed up. Instead of bottles of wine or bouquets of flowers, these house gifts were pledges to take concrete action on nuclear security, such as removing HEU or signing on to one of the conventions. While many participants opted to effectively “re-gift” commitments they had already planned to make, others took significant new steps, and almost all fulfilled their pledges.

At the 2012 summit in Seoul, participants continued this practice but took it a step further, unveiling a series of “gift baskets,” or joint commitments by several states, to goals that included preventing nuclear smuggling and improving control of nuclear information. Gift baskets allowed states willing to take bolder actions to move ahead, without winning consensus support from more cautious countries. Perhaps the most significant of these gift baskets was agreed to at the 2014 summit: Two thirds of participants signed the Strengthening Nuclear Security Implementation Initiative. Under it, states agreed to treat International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) guidelines as minimum standards for domestic law, and to request peer reviews of their nuclear security rules, providing a mechanism by which states could better assure the public and the international community that they were sufficiently protecting materials and facilities.

These house gifts and gift baskets allowed some states to sprint faster than others to strengthen nuclear security. And in an environment in which few were as worried as the United States about the threat of nuclear or radiological terrorism, gifting may have been the most pragmatic means to achieve some progress. Using the gift system, more than a dozen countries were cleared of HEU and scores signed on to the key international conventions.

But the uneven and limited nature of summit commitments means that even after the process ends this year, the nuclear security regime will be a patchwork of many treaty commitments, bilateral and multilateral initiatives, and informal rules, with far too many holes. No single treaty or initiative covers all aspects of the issue, few countries have signed on to all of them, and many are too vague and lack sufficient transparency to allow anyone to judge governments on whether they are providing adequate protection. The summits have done little to address many important areas, including the vast majority of fissile material not in civil use (most of which is not in weapons, but in such forms as fuel for naval submarines); growing civil stocks of separated plutonium; sabotage of nuclear facilities; cyber threats to nuclear security; and the security of readily accessible high-risk radioactive sources that could be used in “dirty bombs” or other radiological weapons. The lack of universal participation in the process—most notably Russia's decision not to attend the 2016 summit—has further contributed to the failure to reach Obama's goal of securing all vulnerable materials.

At the 2016 summit, states are likely to approve some additional and important gift baskets, such as one led by Norway and the Netherlands aimed at eliminating HEU entirely from civil use. Much of the focus, though, will be not on specific commitments but on establishing processes to continue the international dialogue, particularly within five institutions: the IAEA, the Global Initiative to Counter Nuclear Terrorism (a group focused mostly on exercising existing capabilities and sharing best practices), a UN committee that enforces Security Council resolutions calling on states to prevent terrorists from gaining access to weapons of mass destruction, the international law enforcement organization Interpol, and the G8 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction, a funding group.

The end of the summit process opens the possibility that some of its gains might be universalized. It also opens the way for the approach Russia and some other countries want to pursue, which is for nuclear security issues to be handled by existing bodies. However, it is not apparent that any of these five institutions will be able to maintain the political momentum of the summit process without national leaders' involvement in the biannual meetings. As a result, summit countries have begun talking about

additional means of ensuring high-level political attention and involvement by the nuclear industry and outside experts. Such means might include annual expert meetings, regional summits, closed-door meeting of governmental and nongovernmental experts, ministerial gatherings, and CPPNM review conferences.

Still, as any marathoner can tell you, the nature of the course isn't the most important factor in success. More important is the determination of the runner. Whether the international community and the next US president can muster the political will to finish the nuclear security race is an open question.

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DOUG NORTON • a month ago

The Nuclear Security Summits are one of the least-noticed of the Obama administration's national security initiatives but one of the most important. Yet the greatest proliferation threat is almost never addressed directly--as if it's an elephant in the room—the probability of Kim Jong-un selling nuclear warheads to terrorists.

That probability is often discounted or dismissed by asserting that Kim would never sell a nuke. Dictators are survivors. They never do things that threaten their own survival. Selling a bomb means losing control of its use. Too risky.

The dictum of dictator survival is false. Dictators aren't immune from colossal misjudgments. A sampling of rulers who unwittingly set in motion their own deaths includes Tojo, Hitler, Mussolini, Saddam, Khadafy (and perhaps Assad).

The assertion of too much risk ignores the capacity of Programmable Logic Controllers (PLCs). PLCs linked to cell towers and satellites now permit control of devices half a world away. The technology that allows a help desk to unlock your car if you've lost your keys can be adapted to enable or block the firing circuit of a nuclear weapon.

I'm just someone who writes thrillers, but it seems to me that North Korea's nuclear weapons are more dangerous than any others, even Pakistan's.

Doug Norton

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Gul Ramani • a month ago

Yes, the Nuclear Security Summit, promises to be a damp squib. Without sounding alarmist, does the World need a slap on its face - in the form of an unexpected 'accident' - before it decides to act? Just a year back we had a German Wings pilot who in his depression flew his plane into the Alps. Do we even know in how many hands the nuclear trigger is held? There is still a month to go. Let this time be used for us to act to counter "the unfinished work" prediction.

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