

The Fissure at the Nuclear Security Summit

What is the greater threat: fissile material from which nuclear weapons can be fashioned or actual nuclear weapons?

Paul Meyer | March 27, 2014

Since its launch by President Obama at a meeting in Washington in 2010, the nuclear security summit process has provided a biennial opportunity for senior representatives of 53 states to address issues of nuclear security. The latest meeting has just concluded in The Hague with the issuance of a **communiqué** and an offer by President Obama to host a further, and many assume final, summit in 2016. The process has focused, as the communiqué noted “on strengthening nuclear security and preventing terrorists, criminals and all other unauthorized actors from acquiring nuclear materials that could be used in nuclear weapons...” This goal is to be achieved through various voluntary measures with a stress on reducing stocks of highly enriched uranium (HEU) and separated plutonium, the fissile material from which nuclear weapons can be fashioned.

Within the communiqué participating states “recognize”, “welcome”, “reaffirm” and “encourage” for several paragraphs, but there is little in the way of real or new commitment expressed in the text. Indeed the façade of common purpose suggested by the meeting’s concluding statement could not hide a fracturing of the nuclear security grouping that resembled a diplomatic equivalent of atomic fission. The underlying reality is that the “nuclear security” concept that the U.S. applied in its initial blueprint and which it has insisted subsequent hosts adhere to is an artificially narrow understanding of that term. It has chosen to depict fissile material in civilian stocks and the danger that they might fall into the wrong hands as the pre-eminent threat to our security, while ignoring the threat posed by the existing arsenals of nuclear weapons and the fact that many of these 17,000 nuclear arms are deployed on a high-alert posture ready to be launched in a matter of minutes. This skewed depiction of “nuclear security” has perpetuated a fiction as to the real nuclear threats humanity faces and what consequently should be the priority for global leaders when they met to discuss such threats. While several states have been uncomfortable with this restrictive orientation at the summits, it is only recently that dissenting views have clearly been on display.

For those states that believe the process needs to get beyond rhetorical commitments to the goals, there was an initiative by the three summit hosts (the United States, Republic of Korea, and the Netherlands) to strengthen nuclear security implementation by having states “subscribe explicitly to the essential elements of a nuclear security regime.” Some 35 states, including Canada, were prepared to sign on to this separate statement, but a significant minority, Russia and China included, refused to join, considering the initiative overly prescriptive and an infringement on their sovereign prerogatives.

Another grouping of 15 states, led by prominent non-aligned states, expressed their opposition to the narrow focus of the summit process by issuing a **statement** “In larger security: a comprehensive approach to nuclear security.” This statement bluntly noted that, “more than 40 years after the NPT’s entry into force and 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the continued existence of many thousands of nuclear weapons still constitutes the greatest and most immediate risk for humanity.” In addition, the concentration on relatively

small civilian holdings in non-nuclear weapon states was misguided, given that “98 percent of the HEU and 86 percent of the separated plutonium stockpiles worldwide are possessed by the nuclear weapon states.” Accordingly, efforts to secure military holdings of nuclear material should be at least on a par with those aimed at securing civilian stocks. Brazil, one of the signatories of the statement, reminded the summit that “it is not civilian nuclear facilities, but atomic bombs that pose the greatest risk to humanity” and that the elimination of nuclear arsenals “must be an essential component of any effective nuclear security strategy.”

The disconnect between the lofty expectations of the global summit format and the limitations of its narrowly conceived “nuclear security” agenda will continue to detract from the modest progress it has achieved in securing nuclear material and radioactive sources. Some states see the need for this process to be multilateralised through the conclusion of an agreement that would be open to all states and which would assign follow-up to the IAEA. Others want to enlarge the agenda to address the imperatives of nuclear disarmament and the unrealized commitments made under the NPT by its states parties. The challenges to the NPT-based nuclear order are huge even without adding into the mix the chilling effect of the current Ukrainian crisis and the apparent hollowness of the security assurances extended by the U.S., U.K. and Russia to Ukraine in 1994 to persuade it to get rid of its nuclear arms and adhere to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon states.

In the wake of the fractured results from The Hague, there will be time over the next two years for participants in the nuclear security summits to redefine their interests and objectives for this process. If President Obama wants to have the 2016 summit count among his legacy achievements, he may wish to review the template for this event and arrange to have it address a wider and more realistic agenda for nuclear security.

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