Civil Society and Industry Participation in the Nuclear Security Summit Process

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The Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) process has facilitated an increase in the (coordinated) engagement and visibility of nonstate actors in the nuclear materials security area. This paper offers a brief overview of civil society/academia and industry interaction with government actors throughout the NSS process. It also highlights the role of media and funders. This version is a rough draft intended to stimulate discussion. Feedback and suggestions for revisions and improvement are most welcome.

The Venue and the Process

The NSS is an ad hoc heads-of-state level summit first convened in 2010 by U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington, DC in order to build consensus on the threat of nuclear terrorism and to promote individual state actions as well as cooperation on this issue. The NSS reconvened in 2012 (in Seoul) and 2014 (in The Hague) with another meeting set for 2016 (in the United States). With 47 countries and two international organizations participating in the 2010 NSS, the number of participant states as of the 2014 NSS has grown to 53 countries and four international organizations (United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency, European Union, and Interpol). Given the proclivity in American politics for successors to discontinue the signature initiatives of their predecessors, it is expected that the 2016 NSS will be the last of the series (at least in its current heads-of-state format).

The NSS agendas have included the security and minimization of potentially vulnerable weapons-usable fissile materials in the civilian sector; the improvement of radiological source security; cooperation to counter illicit trafficking; the nexus of nuclear security and safety (in the wake of the accident at Fukushima Daiichi); and the strengthening of national implementation of as well as multilateral and regional cooperation on nuclear security governance. Despite repeated attempts to deal with thorny issues like the security of fissile material in the military sector as well as the management of plutonium stocks, the NSS process has been unable to make substantive progress on these issues to-date. It is expected that the fourth summit will engage these policy challenges more directly in addition to making a decisive determination regarding the future of the political process on nuclear security.

In the NSS process the work has occurred primarily within the sherpa teams (interagency points of contact from all of the participant states) that engage for 18 months in the run up to the heads-of-state meeting. The past three summits have delivered a negotiated consensus document—a Communiqué—signed by all participants. The NSS process has also featured more decentralized deliverables such as “house gifts” (individual country commitments to take action or announcements of action taken like the total removal of weapons-usable materials from Ukraine in 2010) and “gift
baskets” or joint statements (mini-lateral agreements on a specific issue among two or more countries participating in the NSS process).

**The Structure of Engagement**

The engagement and visibility of civil society/academia stakeholders has increased throughout the NSS process, especially as these stakeholders have contributed through formalized and official (host-country supported) side events such as the 2014 Nuclear Knowledge Summit (NKS).\(^1\) The main reasons for this increase include the growth of a civil society coalition specific to the NSS venue and the support extended to this community by funders and NSS host governments. In addition, the more decentralized nature of summit deliverables has allowed civil society actors to engage with all summit participants and not just the countries with hosting duties. Because the process has incentivized participant countries to exercise leadership and take credit for their actions during the high-level event, civil society actors have been well positioned to propose ways for them to do so during the preparatory process. In addition, civil society stakeholders have tracked the initiatives of the participant countries in an attempt to hold them accountable to their NSS commitments.\(^2\)

However, the degree to which the policy input provided by civil society has been consistent, substantive, and effective is difficult to measure. This is largely due to the challenge of estimating the true impact of “inside” and “outside” strategies. The former intend to promote the input of ideas through governments’ and sherpa education and socialization as well as more direct consultations and drafting of deliverables’ language with governments. Their measurement relies largely on anecdotal evidence. The latter, in turn, seek to increase issue visibility and create pressure on governments through targeted outreach (publications and events) and focused media attention on the issue. Their measurement relies largely on the number of “media hits” or, once again, anecdotal evidence. Generally, governments welcome positive attention from the media to the issue and may also respond to negative media attention (triggered by civil society publications or commentary) by changing course. Thus, both sets of strategies and somewhat subjective assessments of their success are considered by funders seeking to bring policy change through increasing nonstate actor participation (constructive or disruptive) in the NSS process.

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\(^1\) See website of the NKS: [http://www.knowledgesummit.org/](http://www.knowledgesummit.org/).

\(^2\) This has occurred through preparatory consultations and public releases of reports such as the Nuclear Threat Initiative’s *Nuclear Materials Security Index* ([http://ntiindex.org/](http://ntiindex.org/)) and the Arms Control Association-Partnership for Global Security’s *Assessment of Joint Statements* ([http://partnershipforglobalsecurity.org/2014/03/05/the-nuclear-security-summit-assessment-of-joint-statements/](http://partnershipforglobalsecurity.org/2014/03/05/the-nuclear-security-summit-assessment-of-joint-statements/)).
In turn, nuclear industry engagement in the NSS process went from a rather informal meeting of industry executives with Vice President Biden in 2010 to a pricey and official Nuclear Industry Summit (NIS) in 2014. In 2012 and 2014 (as well as at present in the run up to 2016), industry representatives have structured their own NIS outputs alongside the NSS process by facilitating the work of several working groups that would develop and report out recommendations. This process has built some momentum for a conversation on the need to demonstrate competence for nuclear security as well as implement “best practices” across the industry.

However, NSS host and participant countries have differing attitudes (and restrictions on engagement in the case of the United States) toward their industry actors. Although countries may pledge to improve nuclear security through the NSS process (as it is indeed “the responsibility of states”), the practical implementation and financial consequences of these commitments fall on their domestic nuclear companies. And, the only way for governments to enforce the implementation of these commitments is through increased regulation and oversight. To this end, unless governments have explicit internal restrictions on considering the success of their domestic nuclear industry, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that industry interests are taken into account as countries make (or resist) commitments in the NSS process.

**Building the Civil Society Coalition**

Before 2009, there was a handful of civil society/academic organizations with various sources of funding (government and foundation) for carrying out consultations and research projects dealing with security and minimization of weapons-usable fissile materials. The kernel of the NSS idea was born in these organizations in the run up to the 2008 Presidential election and carried into the administration with appointments from the civil society ranks. As one former official has written, “when President Obama took office in January 2009, the administration already had a detailed set of policy proposals and strategy on nuclear issues, developed during the campaign by policy experts, many of whom, with the support of foundation funding, worked in think tanks and schools of public policy.”

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3 See website of the NIS: [https://www.nis2014.org/](https://www.nis2014.org/).
5 For example, several governments (e.g. United States and Norway) and several grant makers, including the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), supported Center for Nonproliferation Studies activities on civilian HEU minimization, including in specific countries such as Ukraine (that was ultimately “cleaned out” as a house gift for the 2010 NSS). Similarly, the Managing the Atom Project at Harvard University’s Belfer Center produced an annual report on nuclear materials security and management titled “Securing the Bomb,” commissioned by NTI.
There was parallel activity in this area among the funders. A late 2008 survey of member organizations of the Peace and Security Initiative (PSI) identified the need for stronger policy (and therefore civil society work) on nuclear materials security and elimination. As a result, the “nuclear terrorism agenda” became a priority for PSI, launching a landscaping exercise and the plans for a convening of experts in early 2009. After the election to office of President Obama—who as a candidate had included the prevention of nuclear terrorism in his national security platform—the possibility for high-level political attention to be paid to the issue increased greatly.

Obama’s 2009 “Prague speech” publicly aired the idea of convening a high-level summit on nuclear materials security. Around this time, a more structured civil society coalition was formed from groups that had initially come together under the PSI effort leading to the creation of the Fissile Materials Working Group (FMWG). The FMWG’s goals included the support for President Obama’s “four year goal” and also the development of expert policy recommendations in this area. The group’s leadership in organizing a civil society forum on the sidelines of first NSS in 2010 and engaging in media outreach has created a designated space for and an expectation of engagement of civil society actors in this process.

It should not come as a surprise that the core of the coalition involved U.S.-based organizations. However, the FMWG has also grown to include a substantial number of international partners. Since it was first created, the coalition has grown from 20 U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations to 40 U.S.-based and 35 international organizations (and individuals). This diverse representation has allowed for some “internationalization” of the nuclear materials security issue in the civil society space.

Since the first NSS was announced, the FMWG and community created around it have operated under the assumption that every summit might be the last one. Perhaps owing to the venue’s ad hoc nature, the actors in the process have had a limited degree of accountability to the venue and the NSS participating countries. These two factors have facilitated the simultaneous development and implementation of inside strategies with more nuanced and incremental proposals for policy evolution and outside strategies with more unorthodox proposals and calls for transformation on part

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7 The PSI was a Ploughshares Fund effort to collectively focus advocacy organizations, grassroots groups, think tanks, academics, and funders on influencing U.S. policy to promote a more secure, peaceful, just world.

of civil society actors. Arguably, the latter have been more effectively utilized as civil society actors were able to successfully amplify their individual messaging via the coalition or elite media placement.  

**Folding Nonstate Actors into the Official Process**

As the host of the 2012 NSS, South Korea needed to find ways to make the NSS its own. This was a particularly challenging task because the country did not possess nuclear weapons-usable materials. And, despite the resistance of key governments at the inclusion of issues such as the nuclear security/safety nexus and radiological source security, Seoul ultimately succeeded in getting them onto the agenda and into the summit deliverables—a lift that would have been even heavier without the support of civil society (and, as anecdotal evidence suggests, South Korea’s nuclear industry was influential in making the case for the inclusion of the security/safety nexus).

The 2012 NSS was the first summit to feature so-called “gift baskets.” This evolution away from national commitments (“house gifts”) toward greater small-group country cooperation within the NSS process played a positive role by decentralizing the NSS deliverables.  

Thus, likeminded countries could now join and pledge to act within a specific issue area, and their leadership would be recognized. Coupled with the expansion of the NSS agenda and an expansion of the invitation list, this decentralization also increased the number of access points for both civil society and industry.

At the NSS itself, representatives of the FMWG embedded themselves in the press center in order to provide commentary on NSS outcomes and deliverables. As one participant described the group’s messaging strategy: the FMWG would “offer a counternarrative to the anticipated ‘success’ narrative from the NSS-participating governments and to be the ‘go to’ source for journalists.”

The South Korean government also sought to organize official events for both civil society and industry. The FMWG (and the community around it) played a largely consultative role in the organizational process for the civil society event, which was structured largely around plenaries and did not greatly “interact” with the NSS. And, despite the organization of an industry summit and self-organization in that process of industry working groups, its outputs were not

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briefed to the sherpa teams. Some suggest that cultural differences and a general learning curve within the NSS process played a role in the organization of both of these activities.

**Toward the Equilateral Triangle**

As the host of the 2014 NSS, the government of The Netherlands proactively sought out civil society and industry input and solicited their ideas about improving the overall process. The Hague extended official support to both side events of the Nuclear Security Summit. To this end, financial contributions were provided and officials seconded to plan the civil society (Nuclear Knowledge Summit) and industry (Nuclear Industry Summit) events.

In terms of the NSS agenda and the NSS deliverables, the Dutch government also sought input and direct consultation of nonstate actors. This related especially to the proposed language of the signature joint statement on nuclear governance titled *Strengthening Nuclear Security Implementation*, proposed by the three NSS host countries. Through deliberate efforts between sherpa meetings, civil society actors provided language and feedback on the draft of this statement, and also in some cases consulted their respective governments on their need to support this initiative. However, despite efforts by the Dutch hosts (and active track 1.5 activities by civil society) to include a more active focus on issues such as plutonium and military materials on the agenda, this was not successful.

In terms of the format and the structure of the summit’s official events, the NKS (planned with the engagement of the FMWG) consisted of plenaries. The event featured an effective outreach to media, including journalists from developing countries. The NIS, organized with additional financing from Urenco Group and others, featured speakers and the reporting out of three industry working groups.

The hosts also promoted increased interaction between the sides of the NSS-NKS-NIS triangle, and their engagement with the media. Representatives of the NKS and the NIS were invited to brief sherpas at preparatory meetings on their respective activities. Representatives of both were also a part of official media outreach, and accredited as experts to the NSS media center and speakers on special informational panels for journalists.

The view of the Dutch government on the engagement between government and nonstate actors was well summarized in a speech given on behalf of Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans at the NKS:

“[Nuclear terrorism] is a problem that cannot be solved by individual states alone. And to succeed these world leaders need the input of industry, NGOs, academia, foundations. […] Sometimes people say there is an inherent conflict of interest between governmental and non-governmental circles. I don’t agree with that at all. I think the
gap between government and academia or NGOs is not as wide as it seems. [...] I strongly believe that the network society we live in today requires more contact between those inside and outside government. Modern diplomacy, as I see it, should help create and form part of that contact. The policy arena is no longer just government officials giving top-down directives. Private companies, consultancy firms, NGOs and many others are now more horizontally connected than ever before. And diplomacy should be an integral part of that network. Your active involvement in work that used to be the government’s exclusive domain has helped greatly in moving us towards the goals of the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS).”

The biggest challenge in the run up to and around the 2014 NSS were other pressing issues for leaders, such as the Syria chemical weapons removal and, more immediate to the NSS, Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Thus, one of the important roles of civil society was to keep media attention on the true purpose of the NSS. To this end, the proactive engagement and coordination by the Dutch government of these efforts delivered the intended results—despite the ample political distractions.

Coordinating the Disaggregation

The 2016 NSS presents a set of interesting challenges for nonstate actor participation. These include, the changing nature of the interaction between civil society, industry, and government; the agenda and structure of the official process; and the impact of external events on the NSS process. This section previews these challenges before offering tentative lessons learned.

Around the 2016 NSS in the United States, civil society and industry events—if they take place—will not be “official” as they were in South Korea and The Netherlands. The U.S. government will not be in a position to contribute to a civil society event. In turn, the legal restrictions on Washington’s engagement with industry make it impossible also to support to an industry event. At present, there are considerations for a joint event between civil society and industry around the NSS. However, organizers of both NKS and NIS 2016 are also presented with an interesting coordination dilemma—without a date or location for the official NSS, it is incredibly challenging to plan events on its margins. Also, both summits have working groups that will also attempt to feed policy recommendations into the NSS process.

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Setting aside the certainty of an NKS on the margins of the NSS, civil society actors are continuing to build on the achievements of the 2014 summit. The engagement between civil society and government officials has taken both an inside and outside track. As in the past, the inside track has been utilized by individual organizations while the outside track has been reserved largely for coalitions. As of this writing, it remains unclear whether civil society or industry experts will be formally invited to provide briefings at sherpa meetings or related events.

In terms of the agenda, the most pressing issue is the sustainability and future of the political process on nuclear security, especially given the expectation that the summit process will conclude in 2016. In addition, the U.S. as the host is attempting to tackle the most challenging issues to-date in the nuclear materials security and elimination. These include the security of military materials (85% of the world’s supply falls in this realm) and plutonium management. During the 2014 summit, there was resistance by countries to making significant progress on the first two issues through the NSS process.

The turnover in the sherpa community also presents an interesting challenge. A large number of the governmental points of contact have changed since the 2014 NSS. Thus, civil society actors see the need to continue inside (track 1.5) engagement and education of the sherpa community on the achievements to-date of the summit process as well as the issues that the final summit must be bold enough to tackle. With just 16 months to go before the NSS, much remains to be done.

Finally, political turmoil makes outside strategies and media outreach planning a very difficult task. And, it looks like the deterioration of the U.S.-Russian relationship as well as the timing of the NSS with the U.S. election campaign are likely to make not just media messaging, but overall policy planning more dynamic and complex that has been the case in the past.

Possible Lessons for Other Venues

The main reasons for the increase in civil society and industry visibility and engagement in the NSS process include the growth of a civil society community specific to the NSS venue, the NSS host governments’ support of participation by civil society and industry, the leadership exercised by civil society and industry actors, and the decentralized structure of the NSS deliverables.

Some of the possible lessons for other venues include:
1. The proactive interest in and support by funders for civil society engagement in the NSS process has been crucial for stimulating thinking and coalition-building.

2. Host countries’ official recognition of the role of nonstate actors in the process—though greatly dependent on the cultural context—has legitimated civil society and industry engagement. In cases where governments could also engage with industry and facilitate industry-civil society cooperation, this also may be beneficial to policy development.

3. There is a need for both “outside” and “inside” strategies. Coalitions have shown to be an effective way to organize “outside” strategies of impact, which may be helpful or hurtful to governments—depending on the media coverage they elicit. In turn, inside strategies have proven to be more useful in influencing both agendas and summit deliverables.

4. The decentralized nature of NSS deliverables (“gift baskets”) has increased opportunities for civil society engagement in the process, and has also been beneficial for governments seeking to exercise leadership through the process.

5. Because the NSS has been an ad hoc venue, it has provided a useful forcing event for civil society actors, industry, and participant governments. However, the current ambiguity about whether and how to “put more time on the clock” after the 2016 NSS coupled with domestic and foreign policy pressures in the United States have contributed to a more challenging NSS preparatory process for both government and nonstate actors.