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Policy Memo

DATE: October 26, 2012

SUBJECT: Effective and Sustainable Global Nuclear Security: Looking Beyond the Horizon

Summary

With the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) process likely coming to an end after the 2014 summit in the Netherlands, the next eighteen months are crucial for setting an effective long-term agenda for nuclear security and capitalizing on the momentum created by heads-of-state-level political engagement. Integral to crafting this agenda is the consideration of metrics that will allow for not only measuring progress made in securing nuclear material over the span of the three summits, but also for determining the post-summit future of the nuclear security policy discussion.

Although the goal of locking down all vulnerable nuclear materials in four years was agreed to by leaders at the 2010 Washington summit, the goal will not be met by 2014, and even with stepped-up efforts since the first summit, in 2010, a number of nuclear security gaps will remain. Within this context it is important to recognize that improving the nuclear security architecture cannot be confined to or defined by the summit process, but rather the NSS should be seen as a driver of a larger, long-term effort to improve nuclear security worldwide.

The Stanley Foundation convened a group of experts and policymakers from the United States and abroad on October 17-19, 2012, at its 53rd annual Strategy for Peace Conference. The group discussed “Effective and Sustainable Global Nuclear Security: Looking Beyond the Horizon.” This policy memo offers highlights of the discussion and recommendations of roundtable participants.

Strengthening Global Nuclear Security

Even after two relatively successful Nuclear Security Summits, there are still many issues of contention among participating nations. While a nuclear terrorist incident was highlighted as having catastrophic consequences, roundtable participants debated whether to frame nuclear security primarily within that context at the exclusion of other issues. Too narrow of a focus on preventing nuclear terrorism and the security of weapons-usable nuclear material decreases buy-in for many states, particularly those in the developing world, that view this problem as one to be dealt with primarily by a smaller group of states. While a greater emphasis on disarmament as an aspect of nuclear security was also suggested, most participants agreed that other international fora exist for addressing that issue and that it should remain outside the parameters of discussion.

Broadening the agenda, however, is also problematic. Participants addressed the concern of scope creep within the nuclear security agenda between the 2010 and 2012 summits to include areas such as radiological security. The point was raised that this broader framing may be less helpful because nuclear and radiological security require different policies and are also consequentially different. It also was suggested that the threat of nuclear terrorism, which is low, should not be divorced from the shared consequential risk, which is inestimably high. Bringing consequences and likelihood together can be a valuable framing for the argument of universalization.

When participants considered ways to improve nuclear security on the global level, the complex interplay and tension between respecting national sovereignty and building an effective international architecture received considerable attention. While the need to move toward universalizing state responsibility was acknowledged, participants questioned whether working toward a binding global governance regime is realistic in the short term.

Two primary concerns regarding the feasibility of building such a regime emerged. First, binding legal norms would require institutionalization and a more comprehensive framework convention than the current patchwork of agreements and instruments. While the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has a nuclear security component, in its present form it would be unlikely to encompass all of the areas necessary or have the capacity to enforce such a regime. Second, many participants thought that given the basis of nuclear security as a sovereign responsibility, states are unlikely to consider ceding that sovereignty to an international institution. The political will to move toward a more comprehensive binding legal instrument also does not appear to exist at this moment, although it should not be discounted as an aspirational goal.

Participants generally agreed that while nuclear security is a sovereign responsibility, this doesn't preclude the need for multilateral cooperation and action. It was suggested that a more useful frame may be to consider the space between national responsibility for and international governance of nuclear security as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Viewing sovereignty as restricted by certain extraterritorial responsibilities toward the integrity of other states was also offered as basis for considering the relationship between the national and international obligations.

Several characteristics of a strengthened system of global nuclear security were suggested, although consensus was not reached on the advisability of moving forward on each point. The characteristics include:

- Putting greater emphasis on the security of non-civilian materials, especially in the NSS process.
- Accelerating the sharing of best practices through existing institutions and organizations like the World Institute for Nuclear Security and the Centers for Excellence or IAEA Nuclear Security Support Centers.
- Identifying and implementing internal assurances at the national level to build confidence.
- Identifying and implementing international assurances to increase trust between states.
- Minimizing stockpiles of weapons-usable materials and the number of locations where they are stored.
- Building stronger security culture at the national level by increasing capacity through mechanisms like training and peer reviews.
- Increasing technical cooperation.
- Enlarging the responsibilities of the IAEA, with adequate resources to match.

- Effectively implementing existing commitments.
- Strengthening coordination of policymakers with nongovernmental stakeholders, such as industry and civil society.

Particular attention was paid to the idea of assurances, especially the feasibility of providing them at the international level without violating sovereignty and confidentiality. It was discussed that the concept of providing assurances in relation to nuclear security may be more politically palatable than the idea of transparency. Assurances could include actions such as information sharing, certifications, bilateral cooperative arrangements, and peer reviews. Inspections were discussed as a potential tool to work toward, but participants generally agreed that mandatory inspections without a treaty would be difficult. Concerns were raised that assurances may focus too narrowly on the medium term. A warning was also offered that the argument over the balance between sovereignty and increased openness could be the biggest barrier to progress.

Identifying the drivers to create the political will and space to elevate the issue of nuclear security and fundamentally address the identified gaps within the system was also discussed. The transformative nature of a catastrophic event was brought up as the driver that would most motivate, although several participants voiced the opinion that strong leadership can serve as a substitute. Capitalizing on high-level political participation, however, requires a more definitive understanding of what the highest priority outcomes of the summit are and an understanding of the post-summit direction of nuclear security.

Setting an Agenda for 2014

Participants recognized that with the third summit in the Netherlands likely to be the final one, there needs to be a balance between identifying additional practical actions that could be taken and setting an ambitious agenda that would give leaders political cover in the event of a future catastrophic nuclear terrorist incident. In addition, to achieve measurable results and motivate continued practical action after the summit, the agenda should focus on identified gaps that are serious and for which there is political will to deal with them. Many actions could be taken that would marginally improve nuclear security, but the “must haves” can’t get lost in “a sea of nice to haves.”

A number of recommendations were offered on potential agenda items for the summit and deliverables that could be offered by participating states. Despite the group’s discussion surrounding the debate over the scope and definition of nuclear security, participants generally agreed that within the NSS process, the expanded agenda from the 2012 Seoul summit, which includes radiological materials security, should be kept for the Netherlands summit.

It was also suggested that the work plan from the Washington summit and the Seoul communiqué, supplemented by the larger goal from President Obama’s 2009 Prague speech, define the agenda and serve as the basic metrics for measuring progress on the four-year goal.

The following deliverables were suggested for the summit:

- If needed, further encourage the universalization of existing legal instruments, particularly the 2005 amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials.
- Connect the practical actions of the NSS process to existing international institutions, such as the IAEA, that are seen as natural heirs to some portion of the NSS process and strengthening their capacity to work in these areas.

- Commit to tangible action on the minimization of fissile materials, including non-civil materials.
- Strengthen assurances within states and between states by committing to use of mechanisms such as peer reviews, International Physical Protection Advisory Services missions, and best-practices sharing.
- Enhance security culture through improved training, developing communities of practitioners, and strengthened research and development networks.
- Facilitate movement toward a convention on high-intensity radiological source security based on proposals from the July 2013 IAEA nuclear security conference.
- Integrate industry perspectives into the policy discussion leading up to and beyond the NSS.
- Strengthen interaction with civil society leading up to and beyond the NSS.
- Share gift basket ideas earlier in order to better capitalize on areas where states might work together to address issues when consensus cannot be reached, including a possible gift basket related to improving nuclear security governance.

Participants generally agreed that in the Netherlands, states should report on progress made toward their previous summit commitments. Although a specific mechanism or style of reporting was not suggested, concern was expressed that the free-form reporting style utilized by the majority of states at the Seoul summit made it difficult to capture the aggregate progress since the 2010 summit.

Looking Past the 2014 Summit

There was consensus among roundtable participants that if the Nuclear Security Summits, as a biennial heads-of-state-level gathering, do not continue beyond 2014, the momentum garnered from top-level attention must be capitalized on, and the work must continue in a different configuration. Participants generally agreed that it would be useful for government officials involved to recognize that 2014 would be the culmination of the summit process well before it takes place, as this would facilitate discussion about the future of the nuclear security policy discussion within the effort to craft the agenda for the Hague summit.

While it was recognized that no diplomatic approach would be as effective at driving improvements as the NSS, a number of options were discussed as potential vehicles to continue the nuclear security discussion post-2014, including:

- Continue holding summits with heads of state involvement, but extend the interval between summits to four or five years. While this option is attractive in that it maintains high-level political engagement, participants acknowledged that the process would likely suffer from flagging leader interest and diminishing returns.
- Expand the agenda of the NSS process to include a wider array of nuclear issues that could appeal to a greater number of states and reinvigorate the process, such as a greater focus on nuclear safety or disarmament. The disadvantages of this approach, however, are that the emphasis on nuclear security would be lost, and the forum could become too divisive.
- Graft the current agenda and goals of the NSS to an existing summit process, such as the G-8 or the G-20, and incorporate it into the agenda on a biennial or triennial basis. Both of these fora, however, present difficulties. The G-8's membership is far from large enough to encompass the nuclear security issue, and even its Global Partnership initiative doesn't have full overlap with the NSS-participating countries. The G-20, established to deal with the global economic crisis, isn't ready for a mandate extension.

- Create a troika comprising the summit hosts—the United States, South Korea, and the Netherlands—or a slightly larger group and empower it at the 2014 NSS to manage the future nuclear security discussion.
- Downgrade the political level of the summits to the ministerial level or one of special envoys of heads of state. While not as powerful a driver as a heads-of-state-level process, this could maintain some of the momentum gained from high-level political attention. A potential difficulty with this approach, however, is that where nuclear security is nested within existing government structures differs widely from state to state. As a result, determining the proper representative for a meeting at the ministerial level could be difficult.
- Form bilateral or regional groupings of like-minded states at the 2014 summit and commit, through gift baskets, to mutual exchanges of information, sharing of best practices, and other assurances to advance nuclear security principles and norms. As a bottom-up approach of leading by example, these relationships could then encourage others to take similar steps.
- Strengthen and expand the capacity of the IAEA to manage nuclear security, but without dictating the NSS process and goals to the agency.

Conclusion

The likely culmination of the NSS process in 2014 creates one last opportunity to capitalize on top-level political attention and set a strong post-summit course for nuclear security. Although it remains unclear under what auspices nuclear security will be advanced after 2014, careful and creative consideration must be given to this question in the lead up to the summit. Doing so will ensure that nuclear security remains a priority for action, and that the momentum generated by the NSS process continues to decrease the global threat posed by nuclear terrorism.

The analysis and recommendations in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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