

# NUCLEAR SECURITY SUMMITS

## A MODEL FOR MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

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**I**N MARCH 2016, world leaders from more than 50 countries converged on Washington, DC, for the fourth and final Nuclear Security Summit (NSS). Launched by U.S. President Barack Obama in 2010, the NSS process galvanized high-level attention and international cooperation to prevent terrorists from acquiring weapons-usable nuclear materials.

While these summits did not achieve everything they set out to do, they did deliver important commitments to eliminate thousands of kilograms of highly enriched uranium, reduce plutonium stockpiles, and improve security and coordination to prevent nuclear trafficking.

Less noticed, but equally significant, these summits also reinforced an innovative model for multilateral diplomacy—one that strives for consensus but isn't crippled by it, cuts through bureaucratic inertia whilst respecting state

sovereignty, and benchmarks success based on action-oriented commitments. It is a model that could have far-reaching applications well beyond nuclear security—much needed in a time when so many of our existing multilateral institutions are failing.

### A CALL TO ACTION

**I**n April 2009, President Obama described the specter of nuclear terrorism as “the most immediate and extreme threat to global security.” A single terrorist with a nuclear bomb, he said, “could unleash massive destruction.” Indeed, the specter of a nuclear 9/11 has haunted policymakers and experts for years.

Should a nuclear device go off in any major global city, it would leave a trail of unimaginable death and destruction: hundreds of thousands of people killed and injured; trillions of dollars in economic damage globally; and significant long-term implications for the environ-

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*U.S. President Barack Obama hosts the inaugural Nuclear Security Summit in 2010*

ment, public health, governments, and civil liberties around the world. That is why, when asked what keeps him up at night, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said “it’s the thought of a terrorist ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear.”

Although the process of developing a nuclear bomb is complicated, it’s less challenging than one might think. In 1977, a United States government study concluded that “a small group of people, none of whom have ever had access to classified information, could design and build a crude nuclear explosive device.” Most nuclear experts agree: the

most important step in the pathway to develop a nuclear bomb is acquiring fissionable materials—either highly enriched uranium (HEU) or weapons-usable plutonium—that would enable the bomb to explode.

Unfortunately, more than 1,800 metric tons of these materials are stored in hundreds of locations—some poorly secured and vulnerable to theft—across 24 countries. It only takes a small amount of these materials—a quantity of highly enriched uranium about the size of a soccer ball, and a quantity of plutonium the size of a grapefruit—to produce the chain reaction for a

nuclear detonation that would change our world forever.

That is why, in April 2009, President Obama launched a new international effort to secure vulnerable weapons-grade nuclear materials around the globe. He declared that the United States “will set new standards, expand our cooperation with Russia, and pursue new partnerships to lock down these sensitive materials.” He led a call to action for governments to step up efforts to tackle illicit nuclear smuggling, reduce the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, and the materials needed to build them. He ended his speech in Prague by announcing that the United States would host a global summit on nuclear security in the next year, 2010. Thus, the Nuclear Security Summit process was born.

**A GLOBAL NUCLEAR SECURITY SYSTEM**

With the call to action issued and the Summit process launched, leaders and nuclear security experts embarked on what would become a multi-year effort to develop recommended actions that states could take, both individually and collectively, to reduce nuclear risks. The overriding question informing their work quickly became: how to build an effective global nuclear security system?

To focus attention on that question and develop workable answers, the Nuclear Threat Initiative—of which I serve as President—convened a series of meetings between 2012 and 2016 called the Global Dialogue. Government officials, industry representatives, and international experts all convened to consider the elements of an effective global nuclear security system. These meetings were

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indicative of the multi-sectoral and multilateral approach that is needed to address the global challenge of preventing nuclear terrorism.

The Global Dialogue resulted in a palette of innovative ideas, with convened experts identifying four essential characteristics that a global nuclear security system should have:

*First*, the system must be comprehensive. That is to say, it must include all nuclear materials and nuclear facilities. Currently, international mechanisms for nuclear security apply solely to civilian nuclear materials, exempting about 83 percent of the world’s total stockpiles of weapons-usable nuclear materials, which are found in non-civilian programs (such as nuclear weapons, naval reactors, government research and development reactors, etc.).

*Second*, countries should adhere to nuclear security best practices and

international standards. With the entry into force of the 2005 Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM) in May this year, the world has moved one step closer to establishing common “rules of the road” that all states will need to follow to secure their weapons-usable nuclear material. However, the CPPNM still only applies to civilian materials, and implementation will remain an issue of concern for some time to come.

*Third*, countries should help build confidence in the effectiveness of their security practices, and should take reassuring actions to demonstrate that all nuclear materials and facilities are secure. Nuclear security is a sovereign responsibility, but the security, environmental, and societal consequences of a nuclear catastrophe would reverberate around the globe, and shake public confidence in both the nuclear industry and governments.

All states, and the global public at large, have equity in how effective other states are in meeting their security responsibilities. As a result, nuclear security is both a shared and a sovereign responsibility, and countries must take

actions to build confidence and, ultimately, a mechanism for accountability to each other for the security of their materials and their facilities.

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And *fourth*, countries should work to reduce risk through minimizing or, where feasible, eliminating stocks of weapons-usable nuclear materials and the number of locations where they are stored. Eliminating such stockpiles amounts to a permanent reduction in the risk of that material being stolen by terrorists. Today, however, there is far too

much material, in too many locations, and accessible by too many people.

This work must continue by establishing a high-level forum for cooperation and employing an innovative form of multilateral diplomacy. The Nuclear Security Summits have helped advance a number of these principles in the international community—and have resulted in concrete and important steps toward a safer world.

**GIFT BASKET DIPLOMACY**

It’s important to remember that when the first summit opened in 2010, it was an extraordinary event—the largest gathering of heads of state

called by an American president since 1945, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt organized the United Nations Conference in San Francisco. Forty-seven government delegations attended the conference, along with three international organizations—the International Atomic Energy Agency, the European Union, and the United Nations. It marked the first time that nuclear security—a topic typically reserved for policy wonks and specialists—gained primetime attention among heads of state.

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The 2010 Nuclear Security Summit, however, did more than just establish a new high-level forum for nuclear security cooperation. It employed a new method for multilateral diplomacy—but one with great potential.

At the inaugural summit in Washington in 2010, delegations were encouraged to bring *house gifts*, voluntary individual pledges related to nuclear security. At the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, the novel concept of the *gift basket* was introduced. In a twist on the house gift idea, and in addition to bringing individual nuclear security pledges, countries could sign up for collective action agreements with other countries for future implementation. This incentivized bilateral and multilateral coordination at a time when it was

becoming increasingly clear that countries could not tackle serious nuclear security challenges on their own, and when consensus forums were being increasingly paralyzed by blockages from individual states.

The gift basket approach took off, enabling groups of countries to announce commitments well beyond those specified in the consensus-based communiqués. The most recent summit’s gift baskets included joint commitments to reduce stockpiles of HEU, strengthen the security of dangerous radiological sources, like cesium-137, improve coordination to combat nuclear smuggling, and enhance multilateral efforts to improve nuclear terrorism preparedness and response.

A particularly significant gift basket at the 2016 Summit was a joint commitment by 39 countries to form a Nuclear Security Contact Group to continue the work of building an effective global nuclear security architecture well beyond 2016.

Critics have argued that gift basket diplomacy promotes a fragmented approach to nuclear security: some countries will be far ahead of other countries in implementing measures to secure weapons-usable nuclear

materials. They say that for a field like nuclear security—where just one theft of nuclear materials could make all the difference—the international community cannot rely on a piecemeal approach. However, gift basket diplomacy and consensus-based mechanisms do not have to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, in order for gift basket diplomacy to work it needs to be complemented with commonly agreed measures to strengthen the global nuclear security architecture.

For instance, a major achievement of the summit process has been mobilizing enough countries to sign and ratify the 2005 Amendment to the CPPNM—a legally-binding instrument that advances key principles and fundamental responsibilities of countries in the realm of nuclear security. This was done through commitments announced at the 2010, 2012, and 2014 summits. Governments and non-governmental organizations effectively used the momentum generated by the Summit process to recruit the requisite number of states to ratify the agreement, thereby strengthening the international legal framework for nuclear security.

There are several distinct benefits to gift basket diplomacy.

First, gift baskets provide governments with an opportunity to escape the “least common denominator” problem of multilateral diplomacy. If countries want to do more than just what is required of them in the communiqué (and to do so with other countries), they can negotiate a collective agreement to push the envelope and raise the bar for nuclear security excellence.

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Second, they give countries an opportunity to take the lead in drafting and leading negotiations on a joint commitment on a particular issue of importance. For instance, Norway—which has long advocated for HEU minimization—took the lead in drafting a new gift basket at the 2016 Summit on minimizing, and eventually eliminating, civilian HEU.

And third, gift baskets create space for innovation—a word not often associated with international relations these days. Gift basket diplomacy recognizes that consensus on innovative policy solutions for urgent problems like nuclear security takes time—often too much



time. Instead of waiting years, if not decades, to achieve such consensus, this new approach gives countries an opportunity to test bold ideas and develop a normative framework that other countries can join when they are ready.

### AN EVENT-DRIVEN PROCESS

While the Nuclear Security Summits proved to be a unique opportunity for heads of state to discuss nuclear security, the vast majority of the negotiations for the communiqués and gift baskets was conducted by summit sherpas and happened behind the scenes years in advance. During the 2016 Summit, leaders only enjoyed a few hours of discussion on nuclear security while assembled together.

By tying this diplomatic process to a keynote event, governments were able to pace negotiations and demonstrate meaningful results on a deadline. The Summits also provided an opportunity for government officials to establish networks and relationships that otherwise would not be in place, which is an invaluable and intangible resource often overlooked in diplomacy.

Finally, the attention that surrounded the Nuclear Security Summits catalyzed

action. Heads of state used the opportunity to engage bilaterally—with their hosts, but also with other participating delegations. The Summits were accompanied by industry and NGO events, which assembled a critical mass of experts to discuss non-governmental initiatives to enable progress on nuclear security. The news media's interest engaged both stakeholders and the public in a mutually-reinforcing manner. For instance, non-governmental stakeholders had the opportunity to interact with government delegations and promote their policy proposals. In this regard, the Summit process—crucially including the Global Dialogues—opened up diplomacy to the private and non-profit sectors. At the same time, the public enjoyed informative and nuanced coverage about an issue that is often misrepresented or simply overlooked. Leading up to and during the Summits, NGO and industry leaders were on hand to comment on major announcements and achievements, providing expert analysis and criticism for viewers at home.

### A RUSSIAN FLY IN THE OINTMENT

There were some political setbacks along the way. Russia's decision to boycott the final Summit in Washington was an impediment to advancing the

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framework developed by the Nuclear Security Summits. Largely a political decision connected with a breakdown in relations between the United States and Russia, Moscow's absence created a major gap in the coverage of Summit outcomes. Russia, after all, contains the largest stockpile of weapons-usable nuclear material in the world. It is difficult to build a successful global nuclear security system when the world's largest nuclear power refuses to participate.

Yet, at the same time, other international agreements made without the unanimous participation of major powers offer hope that sound policy will prevail over politics. For example, when states negotiated the convention that banned anti-personnel landmines in the late 1990s (known informally as the Ottawa Treaty), they did so without the participation or support of the United States. In 2014, however, the United States reversed course and agreed to apply the provisions of the Treaty in nearly every circumstance, as well as agreeing to destroy its own stockpile of anti-personnel mines. Another example is the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which was negotiated and signed without the support of France or China. Both countries ratified the treaty only decades later. Had the negotiators of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty waited for Paris and Beijing to support the treaty, we could have ended up with many more

countries armed with nuclear weapons than we have today.

Russia's absence at the final Summit was significant—but it will not halt work to develop an effective global framework for nuclear security. In particular, Russia should be encouraged to join the Contact Group established after the Summit to continue the work of strengthening the global nuclear security architecture. Furthermore, Russia should work with the United States to revive its decades-old cooperation on nuclear security matters. It is time for both Moscow and Washington to put this issue ahead of politics and get back to work on securing weapons-usable nuclear materials wherever they are found.

### A NEW MODEL FOR MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

The Nuclear Security Summit process should be credited not only with strengthening the global nuclear security architecture, but also with introducing the gift basket model to multilateral diplomacy. This model has considerable potential to be applied in different contexts beyond nuclear security.

Take, for instance, climate change. Collective action mechanisms modeled after the NSS gift baskets could help facilitate multilateral initiatives that promote activities beyond those required

by consensus-based “lowest common denominator” agreements, such as deep carbon emission cuts, or investments in renewable energy research and development. Countries could then report on the implementation of these initiatives at various international conferences.

Another possible application of this model is in disarmament and arms control verification. In particular, it might help revive the work of the Conference on Disarmament (CD), the world’s only forum for multilateral negotiations on disarmament matters, which has been virtually dead for over 20 years thanks to its consensus-based rules. Countries within the CD could be encouraged to develop commitments on arms control

or disarmament matters—for instance, developing new verification technologies or establishing regional confidence building measures—and to introduce those commitments at annual meetings of the CD. These would help spur innovation on important arms control issues while a political consensus remains elusive.

**A**s the Nuclear Security Summit process comes to an end, world leaders should consider other applications for using gift basket diplomacy. This model can spur innovation and tackle the collective action problem in multilateralism that has hampered progress on some of the most pressing challenges of our time. ●

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