

Smart Talk
No. 7

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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The Washington Nuclear Summit and Challenges on the Road to 2012 Summit in Korea

July 6, 2010

The year 2010 has witnessed rapid progress in galvanizing international support for preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. This is the culmination of the vision set out by President Barack Obama in his Prague speech on April 5, 2009, for a world without nuclear weapons, a vision that is now coming to fruition. A year after the speech, on April 6, 2010, the United States Department of Defense released its Nuclear Posture Review, which clearly defines a decreased role for nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. Two days later, the United States agreed with Russia to reduce nuclear arsenals by a third under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). On April 12 and 13, the first Nuclear Security Summit was held in Washington under the leadership of President Obama with forty-seven countries in attendance to move one step closer toward the world free of nuclear weapons. Finally, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference was held in May 2010 to strengthen the global nonproliferation regime. This two-month period is often referred to as a “nuclear spring,” which has served to undergird another important pillar of the Obama administration’s foreign policy on addressing global nuclear nonproliferation. Yet, it still remains to be seen how his bold nuclear initiative will be developed in the international community.

The East Asia Institute invited Dr. Igor Khripunov, Interim Director and Adjunct Professor at the Center for International Trade and Security of the University of Georgia, on

June 1, 2010, to evaluate the Washington Summit and discuss challenges in improving the nuclear nonproliferation regime as well as for the next nuclear security summit in Seoul. Dr. Khripunov addressed many important questions regarding the nuclear summit meetings and nuclear security, which include outcomes of the Washington Summit, nuclear security and nuclear safety, implementation challenges, security culture, and recommendations for the 2012 summit in Seoul. The following is a summary of Dr. Khripunov’s presentation and the discussion that followed.

Presentation

The Washington Nuclear Security Summit

Since the Prague speech in April 2009, President Obama has been pushing for a world without nuclear weapons by reducing existing nuclear arsenals, strengthening the NPT regime, and working to prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons. The Washington Nuclear Security Summit in 2010 was held in this context to collectively promote a new nuclear security culture, share best practices, and raise global standards for nuclear security. While there is a lack of global consensus on nuclear threats and the reluctance of some governments to support the idea of a global nuclear security summit, forty-seven states and three international organizations did participate in the Washington summit. Most sig-

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nificantly, three nuclear weapon states not party to the NPT were in attendance: India, Israel, and Pakistan.

The summit concluded with a communiqué that addressed various aspects of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation as well as a work plan to promote a world free of nuclear weapons. Dr. Khripunov placed an emphasis on several critical components of the communiqué, which include: 1) increasing national efforts to improve nuclear security and accounting of nuclear materials with strengthened regulations; 2) seeking consolidation of stocks of highly enriched uranium and plutonium; 3) promoting universality of key international treaties; 4) expanding resources for the International Atomic Energy Agency to develop guidelines and provide advice; and 5) sharing best practices for nuclear security in ways that would not infringe upon the rights of states to develop peaceful nuclear energy. In addition, the need for increased bilateral and multilateral assistance received considerable attention.

As part of global efforts to implement the communiqué, the Washington Summit issued a work plan that provides specific guidelines for the international community. The work plan primarily focused on developing a global nuclear security culture, related education and training, as well as research on new nuclear fuels, detection methods, and forensics techniques. Mr. Khripunov noted that nuclear technology suppliers need to support the creation of national nuclear security capacities in recipient countries including the development of human resources. This recommendation is particularly relevant to the South Korean government, which is now seeking to further expand its foothold in the international nuclear energy market and thus is subject to strict obligations as a supplier.

The Washington Summit Agenda

The agenda of the Washington Summit was largely intended to demonstrate the successful hosting of an international gathering and an outcome that would be satisfactory to all participants. In this regard, the Obama administration did not make any huge leap in nuclear disarmament. Rather, it placed more emphasis on setting the stage for the ratification of various provisions, with limited steps each time, and demonstrated successful achievements in terms of enhancing nuclear security and combating nuclear terrorism.

Dr. Khripunov reiterated the synergies and interdependence of five key elements for the nuclear nonproliferation regime: nuclear disarmament, nuclear export control, nuclear security, nuclear safeguards, and nuclear counterterrorism. The Washington Summit recognized that ensuring nuclear security will be a major step forward to prevent potential nuclear terrorism. In addition, the interdependence and interaction of these five components are crucial as well in strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Nuclear disarmament, for example, requires countries to faithfully comply with the NPT obligations and enhance safeguards, and thereby improving nuclear security.

Nuclear Safety and Nuclear Security

Dr. Khripunov pointed out that it is important to review the two concepts of nuclear security and nuclear safety as they are often misused interchangeably. Nuclear security is primarily associated with malicious or negligent acts by humans that would cause or threaten harm to other humans. These intentional acts require responses focusing on intelligence gathering, physical protection, and vigilance and com-

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pliance. Nuclear safety, however, mostly deals with unintended acts or conditions that could cause harm to humans or the environment from radiation releases. The most effective responses involve engineered protection and safety management. Given the lack of the clear-cut distinction between the two terms, the best model, as suggested by Dr. Khripunov, is the coexistence of security and safety that share the common goal of limiting nuclear risks.

Implementation Challenges for the Nuclear Security Summit

Lack of Universality

Most conventions in the international non-proliferation regime have been developed within the organizational context of various agencies including International Maritime Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, and the United Nations. This inevitably leads to diverging goals and institutional arrangements lacking a coherent set of shared visions and promises. Such inconsistencies pose enormous challenges in reaching a consensus on definitions and provisions and ultimately a universal solution. In fact, a comprehensive convention on terrorism is still in the negotiating process due to the lack of a universally accepted definition of terrorism. This perceivable lack of universality will also be under discussion at the next nuclear security summit meeting in Seoul.

A Two-Tiered Structure of the Legal Framework

Both hard and soft legal components form the structure of the legal framework in the international nonproliferation regime. Negotiated

by states through an established diplomatic process and thus binding under international law, hard legal mechanisms entail specific obligations, verification, and enforcement. It may involve sanctions for violations. In contrast, the soft legal component is developed by experts through informal consultations or proposed unilaterally. Often without specific obligations and enforcement mechanisms, the soft legal framework is not considered binding. However, the non-binding nature of soft mechanism attracts more participants given the absence of forceful elements. While some pieces of the soft legal framework have become binding upon ratification, they are hardly imposed in most cases. Accordingly, the challenge ahead is to find the optimal relationship between the hard and soft components of the legal framework.

The Human Factor

Another crucial aspect to consider in implementing provisions of the Washington Summit is the human dimension of nuclear terrorism, a very unpredictable yet vital component of nuclear security. The breakdown of the human factor, intentional or unintentional, may cause the entire system to collapse and expose it to external dangers. A crucial example of such dangers was the November 2007 incident at Pelindaba nuclear research facility, South Africa, in which several armed men managed to break into the control room of the facility. This incident revealed a serious breakdown in security linked strongly to the human factor. One of the solutions for overcoming the breakdown of the human factor is improving security culture. Security culture, which is widely accepted as a final product of the transformation of the human factor for adequately responding to security threats

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through appropriate use of technology and other tools, can be achieved through four phases of training, education, awareness, and commitment.

The road to the 2012 Seoul Summit

The successful 2012 summit meeting in Seoul will enable the South Korean government to project to the rest of the world its image as a strong advocate for nuclear nonproliferation. The Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul will also demonstrate that its neighbor North Korea, claiming to be a nuclear state, is further isolated internationally. Moreover, the summit will promote South Korea’s overseas nuclear technology exports to such countries as Turkey and Jordan. In 2010, South Korea’s potential in the nuclear technology market has gained momentum following the nuclear reactor contract signed with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In its effort to keep the Washington Summit on the surface, the Seoul Summit is advised to focus on the following goals:

- Incorporate the communiqué of the Washington Summit in a resolution from the UN General Assembly or the UN Security Council.
- Review the possibility of codifying nuclear security as the fourth pillar of the NPT.
- Increase transparency of the 2012 summit by inviting all stakeholders to share an equal chance to provide their input.
- Monitor the implementation process of all stakeholders and share best practices to improve compliance standards and establish proper benchmarks.
- Revive the original concept of nuclear security summits as global forums by narrowing the gaps in the nuclear threat assessment of individual countries.

Discussion

A World without Nuclear Weapons: U.S. Domestic Response

In April 2009 President Obama shared his bold initiative of a “world without nuclear weapons” that promotes the reduction of existing nuclear arsenals, bolsters the NPT, and seeks to prevent nuclear proliferation to terrorists. This ambitious goal of the Obama administration has triggered intense debate both in the United States and elsewhere. The question of how this new initiative has been perceived within the United States stimulated a great deal of discussion among the participants during the seminar. One of the South Korean discussants expressed his doubt on the sustainability of President Obama’s lofty goal given the upcoming presidential election in 2012 and other pressing domestic policy issues that have consumed the Obama administration.

In response, Dr. Khripunov pointed out that the opponents to global denuclearization seem to have taken the majority status by a slight margin in the United States. However, he emphasized the importance of close cooperation transcending individual or partisan interests to stop the spread of nuclear technology outside the legal framework. The shared goal of nuclear nonproliferation still remains a priority in the international community. On an additional note, Dr. Khripunov highlighted that it is crucial to revisit the nuclear disarmament issue in the multipolar world where nuclear uncertainty is increasing compared to the relative stability under the bipolar system during the Cold War. The actual circumstances will determine when complete denuclearization can be realized. The question of when the appropriate circum-

tances would arrive remains to be answered.

Outliers of the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington

Another critical point raised by the discussants covered problems arising from states that seek nuclear weapons outside of the legal framework such as Iran and North Korea. The North Korean nuclear crisis creates direct and imminent impediments to the international nonproliferation regime promoting the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism that has been in place since 2006. Despite the international efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program through diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions, Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions have not been successfully thwarted. The question of how to control and transform the North's nuclear behavior needs a concrete answer to find feasible solutions to fundamentally reduce nuclear threats and prevent nuclear proliferation. In recognizing the North's resistance to fully comply with international norms and regulations, Dr. Khripunov expressed a rather pessimistic view that the 2012 nuclear security summit alone will not be sufficient enough to persuade Kim Jong-il to denuclearize. Accordingly, maintaining the balance between soft and hard mechanisms within the international legal framework is important in dealing with North Korea and constraining the nuclear behavior of other non-state actors that illegally pursue nuclear weapons as well as the transfer of nuclear technology.

Similarly, Jay Nash, Director of East Asia Projects for CITS, commented on North Korea's illegal trafficking of nuclear technology that more support is needed for hard bases of nuclear legal framework both in the United States and East Asia. In particular, between

South Korea and the United States, both countries need to work on a more global side to the issues. The promotion of the Proliferation Security Initiative serves as a good example of such global focus beyond the Korean Peninsula. Within the bilateral context of South Korea and the United States, it is essential to build more effective instruments capable of preventing North Korea's illegal trafficking of nuclear technology

Increasing Voice for Nuclear Reprocessing in South Korea

Since South Korea joined the NPT in 1975, it has been prohibited from reprocessing used nuclear fuel even for peaceful purposes under the treaty. This triggered policy discussions in South Korea arguing for its right to reprocess nuclear fuel given the growing accumulation of spent fuel. The South Korean discussants also shared this view navigating through any feasible ways that might secure South Korea's right for the peaceful use of nuclear reprocessing possibly by enhancing safeguards and increasing transparency.

In contrast to the relatively optimistic view held by the South Korean discussants, the American participants expressed somewhat negative viewpoints against the increasing voice for nuclear reprocessing in South Korea. Mr. Nash pointed out that nuclear experts in the United States tend to associate nuclear reprocessing with tools for proliferation. Likewise, the debate on reprocessing seems to provoke negative images of the proliferation of nuclear weapons material. This greatly contributed toward the strong mindset against nuclear reprocessing. Moreover, North Korea's two nuclear tests generated more risks in the eyes of U.S. policymakers, leading to further criticisms of South Korea's attempt to

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secure its own reprocessing rights. Allowing other countries to reprocess spent nuclear fuel does not fall into the long-term interests in Washington.

Mr. Nash, however, expressed some hope for finding feasible solutions that will enable South Korea to reuse spent nuclear fuel. Adding to Mr. Nash's comment, Dr. Khripunov shared his idea with the participants that building regional or global repositories might be one way to deal with this issue and the 2012 nuclear summit in Seoul might serve as a vehicle for promotion. The constantly growing accumulation of nuclear fuel waste has placed the international community in a deadlock. Therefore, nuclear reprocessing might become a necessity in the near future in the absence of an alternative despite the potential security dilemma.

Looking Ahead: The 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul

As the 2012 Seoul summit aims at reaching a consensus, it is recommended to narrow down the agenda to three or four major issues. The summit needs to consolidate support from all of the participating countries toward the outcome of the summit in order to ensure success by avoiding controversies. In this regard, Dr. Khripunov pointed out that there have been different expectations for the summit among different interest groups. For example, NGOs tend to push for ambitious goals, whereas governments put forward rather modest objectives to be discussed at the summit. In addition, a limited number of experts in nuclear issues reflect the insufficient human resources to deal with a vast range of initiatives, arrangements, and mechanisms already in place. When discussing the diverse nuclear nonproliferation issues at the interna-

tional level, Dr. Khripunov argued, it is more realistic to take one step at a time in pursuing shared goals. ■

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