



The Nuclear Security Summit

Trilateral Considerations of North Korea's Nuclear Program

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The fourth and final Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) was held in Washington, D.C., on March 31–April 1. Ever since the first gathering in Washington in 2010, President Barack Obama, as the founder of the NSS, has continuously expressed the goal of reducing stockpiles of nuclear materials worldwide, and the United States has made a great effort to fulfill this vision. Significant progress has been made over the last six years: the Iran nuclear deal, in particular, is regarded as a historic achievement of the Obama administration. However, there remains deep skepticism about the success of the NSS, and critics argue that the reality we encounter now is a long way from the summit's original goal. The absence of Russia at this year's summit added more frustration and fostered doubt about the future of global collaboration on these important issues.

President Obama met with South Korean president Park Geun-hye and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the summit to discuss issues of significance for the trilateral relationship, including North Korea's nuclear program. Though this issue is not directly related to the original goal of the summit, the NSS marked the first chance for Obama, Park, and Abe to engage at such a high level after the fourth nuclear test by North Korea in January. UN Security Council Resolution 2270, passed only on

March 2, 56 days after the fourth nuclear test, has yet to produce the substantial effects anticipated, in spite of unprecedentedly tough sanctions. In fact, Pyongyang has responded with a series of missile launches and hostile language. Some critics of the sanctions have even said that international hostility is actually driving Pyongyang to accelerate development of its nuclear capability beyond a level at which it would continue to be open to negotiations. Others have argued that this kind of politically sensitive topic, which can cause contention even among the summit participants, and more specifically between the United States and China, is less relevant to the original purpose of the summit.

In spite of considerable criticism and clear challenges going forward, however, it is fair to say that the NSS has left the following three legacies. First, the issues surrounding North Korea's nuclear program have become intertwined with the broader problem of safeguarding nuclear materials through dialogue at the NSS, which is necessary and meaningful for better

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management of these issues. For example, connections between North Korea and the Middle East via nuclear and missile programs have been revealed by policy experts. A “dirty bomb”—a weapon that combines nuclear material with conventional explosives—appears to be a more likely threat than intercontinental ballistic missile attacks, though North Korea’s consecutive nuclear tests, accompanied by missile launch tests, remain a real threat to the world. We have to recognize the possibility that North Korea, isolated from the international community and able to produce nuclear materials, could collaborate with terrorist groups to bring about a devastating attack. That is why bringing North Korea’s nuclear program into discussions at the final NSS was especially meaningful.

Second, the NSS has demonstrated U.S. leadership in safeguarding nuclear materials. The importance of this cannot be exaggerated, especially in the post–Cold War era. It was disappointing that the other major player in this field, namely Russia, did not attend, but Russia’s absence does not necessarily mean that it denies the significance of the summit. Rather, Moscow might not have wanted to endorse U.S. leadership in this field. Other than the United States, 51 countries attended the summit, including China and India.

Third, the summit demonstrates strong support from U.S. allies such as South Korea and Japan for multilateral approaches to nuclear security. The effectiveness of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has often been questioned, and many critics continue to express their skepticism about international nuclear regimes. Their frustration may be even greater in the near future because the NSS will be downgraded from a summit to a ministerial-level meeting. However, as President Park stressed, it is undeniable that the summit encouraged multilateral approaches to this

matter. She said, “I hope this conference will serve as [a] historic starting point to this end,” and she pledged that “as the chair country of the IAEA’s ministerial-level international conference on nuclear security, scheduled for December, Korea will ensure that the IAEA plays a key role in the nuclear security regime.” Existing international organizations like the IAEA definitely need the collective and robust stewardship of responsible and reliable countries such as the United States, Japan, and South Korea. From this point of view, the NSS has contributed to building partnerships among the participant countries and enhancing practices of international organizations. ∞



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