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(Washington, D.C.): North Korea’s claimed nuclear test this week has sparked renewed interest in nuclear forensics, a series of scientific techniques used to accurately identify the source of the nuclear bomb or material used to make a nuclear explosion. Two nuclear experts make the case for developing an enhanced and expanded nuclear forensics capability in the current issue of Arms Control Today, which is published by the independent and nonpartisan Arms Control Association.

Nuclear forensics has long been part of the U.S. toolkit, but could become far more critical in providing “extended deterrence” in the event of a nuclear terrorist attack. Knowing that their deadly wares could be traced back to them and fearing the likely severe consequences, potential proliferators might think twice about dealing with terrorists.

Today, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius called on the United States to pursue a “crash program” on nuclear forensics. In their Arms Control Today article earlier this month, William Dunlop and Harold Smith support the concept, but argue that bilateral or international forensic capabilities would best serve U.S. and global security interests. Dunlop is a semi-retired scientist from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories. Currently at the University of California at Berkeley, Smith is a nuclear physicist and a former assistant to Secretary of Defense William Perry for nuclear, chemical and biological defense programs.

Determining the source of the nuclear bomb or material used in a terrorist attack is vital, according to the two experts. An accurate finding “would help in restoring confidence to populations fearful of additional detonations and provide governments with evidence to pursue and find the perpetrators and eliminate further threats,” they write.

In what would clearly be an extremely tense and distrustful post-attack atmosphere, the authors contend, “the credibility of the nuclear forensic information would be significantly enhanced if provided or corroborated through a multinational or at least bilateral nuclear forensic team.” Dunlop and Smith recommend that the initial steps toward creating such a team begin with the United States and Russia.

The article, “Who Did It? Using International Forensics to Detect and Deter Nuclear Terrorism,” is currently available on the Arms Control Association’s web site. A sidebar to the article provides an easy-to-follow explanation on how scientists can determine the nature of a nuclear explosion and potentially pinpoint from what material or arsenal it originated.

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