The April nuclear security summit that President Barack Obama will host in Washington will be an unprecedented event. More than 40 heads of state from the developed and developing world will gather to discuss the need to prevent nuclear terrorism and secure all vulnerable nuclear materials in four years. This four-year pledge—a cornerstone of the Obama administration’s nuclear security policy—must be achieved.

To realize this goal, however, it will be essential that the summit’s agreements break new ground and that the commitments be rapidly, effectively, and sustainably implemented. Most of the rules of the road for nuclear security were written during the Cold War. They are outdated and desperately need to be supplemented with new initiatives. The nuclear summit is the place to root these new standards and initiatives so they can survive and grow. Only commitments made at the top level of government are likely to endure the bureaucratic and technocratic policy grinder that has kept bold new ideas from being adopted up to this point. Allowing the nuclear summit to become an opportunity just to endorse and modestly strengthen the status quo would be extremely disappointing and potentially very dangerous.

To avoid the possibility that the summit could be long on hype and short on action, the event should be viewed as a three-phase process, with objectives clearly defined for each stage. The lead-up to the summit should be used to generate new international commitments to secure nuclear and radiological materials worldwide and to increase the capacity of national governments and international institutions to address these challenges. The summit itself, which will take place April 12-13, should culminate in the approval of specific, time-bound goals and actions by the represented governments. The postsummit period should include regular technical meetings to discuss implementation of the commitments and additional steps that should be taken as circumstances evolve. In addition, there should be an agreement on a schedule of regular public reporting on the progress toward the commitments as well as regular political level follow-up among the summit attendees and with other countries to make the process more inclusive.

The Summit’s Scope

In his April 5 Prague speech, Obama outlined his arms control and nuclear nonproliferation objectives. At the top of the list was his assessment that terrorists are “determined to buy, build, or steal” a nuclear weapon. To prevent this danger of nuclear terrorism, the president outlined the following major policy goals:

- Lead a global effort to secure all nuclear weapons materials at vulnerable sites within four years.
- Convene a nuclear security summit hosted by the United States within a year.
- Set new standards and pursue new partnerships to lock down sensitive nuclear materials.
- Turn ad hoc efforts, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, into international institutions.
• Build on efforts to break up black markets, detect and intercept materials in transit, and use financial tools to disrupt dangerous trade.\[1\]

Obama’s concern with nuclear terrorism is consistent with a number of recent statements by current and former government officials[2] and major blue-ribbon commission reports that have been published. The 2004 “9/11 Commission Report” stated that “[p]reventing the proliferation of these weapons [of mass destruction (WMD)] warrants a maximum effort.”[3] The 2005 “9/11 Public Discourse Project: Final Report on 9/11 Commission Recommendations” gave a grade of D to the implementation of that recommendation. It further stated that the president should “dramatically accelerate the timetable for securing all nuclear weapons-usable materials around the world and request the necessary resources to complete this task.” It said Congress should “provide the resources needed.”[4] The 2008 “WMD Report Card: Evaluating U.S. Policies to Prevent Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Terrorism Since 2005” gave a C to the prevention of WMD terrorism and called for prioritized funding and the abandonment of a “patchwork” approach to the challenge.[5] The 2008 “World At Risk: The Report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism” advocated that the United States work to gain international agreement on “specific, stringent standards” for securing nuclear materials.[6] In May 2009, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States warned that nuclear terrorism is a “very serious threat.”[7]

U.S. concerns about the dangers posed by nuclear terrorism are not widely shared in some quarters of the globe, especially in the developing world. Many governments view nuclear disarmament as a more important topic and have concerns about protecting their peaceful uses of nuclear technology.[8] Also, some parts of the global community are allergic to “made in America” policy prescriptions. The Obama administration is trying to overcome this resistance by reaching out to the summit partners and being sensitive to their concerns, but this balancing act is difficult. It could lead to a lowest-common-denominator result for the summit, which would be unwelcome.

Already, there are concerns that the summit will focus only on existing mechanisms and not endorse any new initiatives, although a work plan may be approved for the implementation of the commitments that are made. Another set of concerns springs from the specific substance of the summit and the potential perception of it. Because of its focus on the need to secure vulnerable nuclear materials, the summit can and perhaps will be seen as sending the message that some countries are not adequately protecting their sensitive nuclear assets, leaving them potentially vulnerable to terrorists. This uncomfortable reality is at odds with the grandeur of top-level international summitry.

Yet, the growing global stockpile of nuclear and radiological materials and the increasing boldness of terrorists are changing the international requirements for nuclear security.[9] What have not yet changed are the international obligations that respond to these evolving circumstances. For example, fissile material stockpiles are the sovereign possession of every country that holds them, and each of these countries has the national obligation to protect them to the highest level. If a country is facing difficulty in meeting international or domestic nuclear security standards, however, it should be obligated to seek and accept international assistance. The lack of a set of requirements to which every nation must adhere makes judging the consistency and adequacy of some countries’ nuclear security difficult. Also, because of the sensitivity of the materials, key countries often resist cooperating with foreign countries and organizations on nuclear security issues. The summit almost certainly will not identify specific countries and specific problems; that forum is not the appropriate place to call out these details publicly. Nevertheless, the security challenges around the globe are well known, and these vulnerabilities need to be resolved rather than papered over.

In addition, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will likely have a role at the summit. The IAEA, which is the central international repository of knowledge and assistance for nuclear material security, has deep international legitimacy. A country does not need to be a party to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to seek IAEA assistance. For example, India and Pakistan, both NPT nonparties, have worked closely with the IAEA on nuclear safeguards.

A number of international conventions have been created to ensure the protection of nuclear materials. For example, the 1980 Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material is a
legally binding agreement to protect civilian nuclear materials in transit. It was amended in 2005 to require states to protect their nuclear materials even when not in transit. The amendment also requires states to protect facilities and expands measures to prevent and respond to nuclear smuggling. The amendment can enter into force when two-thirds of the states-parties have ratified it, but to date, only 32 of 142 countries have approved it. Generating commitments from all summit-attending governments to accept this amendment is likely to be one important goal of the summit organizers.

Many NPT parties have not brought into force an IAEA additional protocol, which allows for more intrusive nuclear inspections. Getting a commitment from all summit participants to sign and ratify an additional protocol is expected to be another important summit objective.

Supplementing these efforts are ad hoc initiatives, such as the U.S.-created Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. The CTR program has been operating since 1992 specifically to work with Russia and former Soviet states, although in recent years Congress has incrementally granted greater authority to many of the programs to work in other nations and regions. The program’s multilateral corollary is the Group of Eight (G-8) Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction, created in 2002. The Global Partnership has contributors that number well beyond the G-8 countries, but the effort is still focused primarily on Russia, although in 2008 the G-8 agreed to expand the geographical scope. The summit may include reference to the need to continue the Global Partnership beyond its current expiration date of 2012 and may also endorse expanding the implementation on a more global basis.

In October 2006, Russia and the United States created the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. The Global Initiative is a nonbinding forum for sharing nonproliferation expertise and information and for preventing nuclear terrorism. In three years, this initiative has grown from 13 to 76 member countries. The summit could seek to institutionalize and further expand this group.

Several UN Security Council resolutions, including Resolutions 1373 and 1540, passed in 2001 and 2004, respectively, are aimed at preventing WMD terrorism and are binding on members under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. Most recently, Security Council Resolution 1887 outlined a broad range of nuclear security and nonproliferation requirements and objectives. Resolution 1540 is particularly important because it calls on countries to take action on improving WMD security and then report on their actions. To address the difficulties that some countries are having in meeting these obligations, Resolution 1887 called for consideration of a voluntary Resolution 1540 implementation fund. In addition to expressing support for compliance with these resolutions, the summit attendees could make the initial contributions to the proposed implementation fund.

The currently contemplated summit communiqué will highlight most, if not all, of these conventions, agreements, and mechanisms, in addition to some of the Obama administration’s other policies, such as minimizing the civil use of highly enriched uranium (HEU) and improving the global nuclear security culture.

Although all of these goals are important and worthwhile, a strategy that focuses primarily on gaining compliance with existing agreements and mechanisms could result in a confirmation of the inadequate status quo. Despite the recommendation of the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament that the summit should “focus on the effective implementation of existing agreed measures rather than the development of new ones,” that outcome would waste a singular opportunity to galvanize global attention to a looming danger, bridge the international threat perception gap, and put in place new commitments and initiatives that would drastically improve global nuclear security.

**New Initiatives for the Summit**

The lead-up to the summit is critical for weaving together the strands of old and new policies that can be durable and effective in meeting 21st century nuclear security goals. Motivating the international community to effectively face an amorphous but potentially devastating transnational danger, such as the one arising from inadequately protected nuclear materials, presents unique challenges, in part because of the differing perspectives of countries on the priority of the problem.
Entrenched domestic political and economic interests are another factor. The domestic and international political agendas of key countries are already influencing the goals of the summit. There must be an international consensus on the dangers from nuclear terrorism and inadequate nuclear security, even if opinions differ on the solutions. Achieving consensus on the threat, at a minimum, is one of the Obama administration’s key objectives for the summit.

Despite a desire by the Obama administration not to link the NPT too closely to the objectives of the summit, it will be in the minds of many leaders, not least because of the NPT review conference a month after the summit. Although the NPT is an essential and important foundation for nonproliferation efforts around the world, it is increasingly inadequate to address modern challenges. The treaty has broad international legitimacy, which is critical, and is tied to the IAEA, an institution on which many countries rely heavily for support and information on best nuclear security practices.

Neither, however, was designed to deal with nuclear terrorism. Terrorist organizations have proven that they can operate globally, plan quietly, and inflict devastating damage, and al Qaeda has stated that obtaining nuclear weapons is a priority goal. The United Kingdom, however, in its “Road to 2010” report calls on “international partners to work...to establish nuclear security as a new fourth pillar” of the NPT bargain. U.S. officials, while not formally endorsing the UK’s fourth pillar concept, have made clear that they intend to draw more attention to the importance of nuclear material security in the NPT context.

Establishing global fissile material security as a top-level international objective will require an international consensus that goes beyond current mechanisms and embraces new policy initiatives to achieve this objective. Establishing the legitimacy of these new initiatives will be a critical challenge. The following are ideas that could have resonance within the international community and that should be considered as new initiatives for agreement at the summit and negotiated in advance of it.

**Agree on a fissile material security framework.** There is no international framework agreement on fissile material security and, as a result, no organizing force to drive the agenda. One important objective that should be under consideration for the summit is the creation of a framework agreement that identifies the threats to humankind from vulnerable fissile materials, especially the threats posed by terrorists, and lists actions required to mitigate them. A framework agreement would allow the subject to be acknowledged at a very high political level as a global priority and then require the adherents to take specific steps to achieve the agreement's objectives. It will be essential that any new framework look beyond the obligations and capacities of governments to include the civil society and private sectors as partners in this process.

While chairing the UN Security Council Summit on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Disarmament in September, Obama pointed to one path for establishing this framework and its legitimacy. The council unanimously approved Resolution 1887, which creates a framework of commitments and objectives for global nonproliferation.

Alternatively, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which entered into force in 1992, is another example. This convention established the protection of the climate system as a long-term objective. Subsequent actions guided by the convention have been aimed at mitigating the impact of climate change on the global environment. The convention could be a model for a fissile material security framework agreement. It would allow for agreement on the threats, goals, and challenges and then require periodic international meetings on specific implementation steps. These meetings could focus on review of implementation progress, discussion of the evolving threat, and policy modifications and additions. Such a continuing dialogue would provide pressure and incentive for countries to act and demonstrate their commitment.

The framework could include a number of items and usefully package them so that its norms are unified, clear, and cohesive. For example, the framework could recognize all the relevant existing conventions, agreements, and Security Council resolutions, including conventions on the suppression of acts of nuclear terrorism and of terrorist financing and bombings. It could underscore the legitimacy of the ad hoc nuclear security mechanisms such as the CTR program, the Global Partnership, the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism,
and others. It could identify a minimum standard for nuclear and radiological material security based on IAEA standards, while encouraging implementation of the highest possible security standards through an intensive, global best-practices engagement process. In addition, it could encourage public-private partnerships in support of nuclear security and recognize the important role that the civil society sector plays in this area.

**Strengthen the IAEA.** The IAEA has an important role in global nuclear security, but its safeguards activities are underfunded, it does not have enough technical staff, and it is ill prepared to fulfill increased demands in the future. Tinkering with the IAEA so that it has a stronger nuclear security role is a delicate business, in part because there will be pressure to match any increase in the board-approved safeguards budget with increases in the budget for technical cooperation and other projects. The IAEA can accept voluntary contributions, however, in addition to the assessed contributions for this budget. For example, the United States makes a voluntary contribution each year. Those funds can be earmarked for specific security purposes without being subject to the regular board approval process. Therefore, in the lead-up to the summit, several actions should be taken:

- The developed countries attending the summit should commit to increase their voluntary IAEA contributions for four years and earmark the funds for nuclear security. The goal would be to match the current IAEA nuclear security budget of about $150 million per year.[17]
- All countries participating in the summit should agree to train a specific number of additional nuclear security specialists for assignment at the IAEA so they can fill the slots that the additional voluntary contributions would create.
- The summit countries should pledge funding for regional and bilateral nuclear security meetings as complements to broader IAEA-strengthening efforts.

**Create a global nuclear material security road map.** The summit countries need to commit to the creation of a road map for securing vulnerable nuclear materials. The road map should be based on measurable benchmarks of vulnerability and proven security upgrades. The document does not necessarily have to be public, but it should be a consensus document that identifies the priority locations, ranked highest to lowest, and the financial and technical resources to correct problems as quickly as possible. The road map should be supplemented with a plan for international scientific cooperation to prevent nuclear theft and terrorism.

**Consolidate and eliminate global HEU and plutonium stockpiles.** The global growth of HEU and plutonium stockpiles is one reason that concern about potential nuclear terrorism is growing. The summit countries should agree to implement two steps to mitigate this danger. First, they should agree to minimize the number of locations at which the materials are stored. That goal could be accomplished through consolidation and, in the case of HEU, by down-blending it for storage or for use as reactor fuel. Second, the countries should agree to extend international monitoring over all civilian stockpiles and, in nuclear-weapon states, over declared excess military fissile material as well.

**Minimize and then eliminate the use of HEU.** HEU is the fissile material most vulnerable to exploitation by terrorists; in particular, its use in civil applications heightens this danger. A number of countries, however, oppose phasing out the use of HEU. Some of them point to their medical isotope production, some to nuclear research experiments, and some to the need for fuel for naval propulsion. Nonetheless, Resolution 1887 calls on states to “minimize to the greatest extent that is technically and economically possible” the use of HEU.[18] That language leaves a wide margin for the material’s continued use.

Technological advances are producing fuels that can replace HEU even in the most difficult cases. Therefore, the international community should come to an agreement on a timetable for a phaseout and ultimate ban on the civil use of HEU. This objective is probably too controversial for agreement at the summit, but if that proves to be the case, further technical and political discussions on this subject should be endorsed by the summit communiqué.
Create regional nuclear training centers. Russia and the United States, in the course of their collaboration on nuclear security improvement, have created several regional nuclear training centers in Russia. These centers have become hubs of expertise and training for nuclear facilities in need of security improvements. This concept should be expanded, with the establishment of regional training centers in other key areas around the globe. The new centers would cultivate a local security culture, improve efficiency by consolidating training courses rather than repeating training to multiple audiences, and provide ready access to information on best practices among partners. At the summit, the United States should offer to fund the establishment of these centers. Eventually, they could be supplemented or fully supported by Global Partnership countries and the IAEA. Ultimately, these centers could expand their mission to include regional nuclear monitoring that could supplement IAEA activities.

Secure all radiological sources in metropolitan hospitals. Radiological sources, which are in use in every major metropolitan hospital in the world, pose a danger if they fall into the wrong hands. The U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has completed a pilot project with the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania to make the hospital’s radiological sources more secure and to initiate cooperation with the local authorities.[19] The summit attendees should build on this important success and commit to take similar actions in their countries. In the United States, approximately 500 major metropolitan hospital buildings use radiological sources. At a cost of roughly $250,000 per building, the total cost of completing projects at all of them would be about $125 million.

Postsummit Implementation

Whatever the results of the summit in April, several actions will be necessary in its aftermath. The first is to create a process for tracking the implementation of the commitments made in the summit communiqué. One important component of that document must be creation of a regularized technical dialogue among the specialists from the communiqué signatories. This process could be semiannual or allow for ad hoc bilateral and multilateral meetings. It should include private sector and civil society representatives when appropriate, and it must ensure that the summit agenda remains dynamic and evolving.

Second, the summit countries should agree to issue an annual report on their implementation progress. The report could include the steps each has taken to meet the summit’s commitments and provide information on the technical meetings and plans for the upcoming year. The document should be public. Transparency in this process is important before the summit, at the summit, and in follow-up activities.

Third, the summit attendees must commit to reaching out beyond their ranks to other countries to draw them into the dialogue on how to make serious progress on nuclear material security. Some criticism of the summit is likely because it does not include all nuclear countries, but an event that inclusive would be unwieldy and substantively diluted. The governments attending the summit could use the event as a starting point to initiate and continue regional security dialogues with countries not included in the April group.

Finally, the official summit attendees must ensure that the civil society and private sectors are fully engaged in the summit agenda. In the United States, more than 40 organizations and experts formed a Fissile Materials Working Group within weeks of Obama’s Prague speech. They sent him a letter identifying five priorities for achieving his four-year pledge and are in the process of planning their own international nuclear summit for April 12, just before the official event, to help the press and the public better understand why this agenda is so essential.[20] Their postsummit plan is to hold meetings to evaluate and measure progress over the next several years.

The Consequences of Failure

In his first year in office, Obama has taken three important steps to improve nuclear material security around the globe. Last April, he made a political commitment to secure all vulnerable nuclear materials worldwide in four years. He then highlighted the importance of this and other nonproliferation issues for the world community at the United Nations in September. Finally, he
invited over 40 heads of state to Washington to participate in a first-ever nuclear security summit this April. But these political objectives must result in concrete action and that will take considerable and sustained political, diplomatic, and technical engagement. Because the goal of securing all vulnerable nuclear materials is extremely ambitious it could face significant opposition from some of the summit attendees and other countries. Energy demands resulting in an increase in nuclear power and materials, the economic and political empowerment of the developing countries that makes them less willing to be swayed by Western concerns, and the damage done to U.S. credibility from exaggerating the WMD danger in Iraq are all contributing to the difficulty of the task. These factors will further complicate the task of building international consensus to support tougher nuclear security standards, secure vulnerable nuclear materials, and prevent nuclear terrorism.

Despite these forces of inertia, however, the nuclear summit and in particular the activities that occur before and after, cannot be conducted as business as usual. Obtaining commitments—including some that exceed agreements in place today—to advance this agenda significantly, locking down those commitments at the heads-of-state level at the summit, and vigorously following through with rapid implementation are the necessary steps to make the summit matter. Otherwise the summit could suffer from a lack of ambition and turn into a lost opportunity to drive the more aggressive global action required to bolster global nuclear security.

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ENDNOTES


8. At the 2005 NPT Review Conference, the South African representative, Abdul Minty, delivered a statement saying, “There is growing concern that while demands are being made for non-nuclear-weapon States to agree to new measures in the name of non-proliferation, concrete actions towards disarmament are neglected. South Africa wishes to reiterate that it cannot support unwarranted restrictions on the NPT’s guaranteed access to such nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes by States that are fully compliant with their obligations under the NPT.” Abdul Minty, Statement by the Republic of South Africa during the general debate of the 2005 Review Conference of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, May 3, 2005, www.un.org/events/npt2005/statements/npt03southafrica.pdf.


10. Only 12 of the 43 countries invited to the summit have ratified the 2005 amendment. The United States has not ratified the amendment.

11. Of the 43 countries invited to the summit, 36 have signed an additional protocol. It has entered into force in 29 of those countries. An additional protocol is in force in the United States.

12. Of the 43 countries invited to the summit, 31 are currently partners in the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.


15. See the August 12 speech by Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Nonproliferation Susan Burk to the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (http://geneva.usmission.gov/2009/08/12/ambassador-burk); see also Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s October 21 speech to the U.S. Institute of Peace (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/10/130806.htm).


Approximately 25 percent of the IAEA’s annual budget is provided by the United States through the Department of State. In fiscal year 2008, the United States provided $94 million of the IAEA’s $390 million total regular budget and another $51.8 million in voluntary contributions. Additionally, the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) assists the IAEA by providing financial and in-kind contributions totaling $53.3 million plus two full-time nonproliferation experts detailed to the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Vienna in fiscal year 2008. NNSA, “NNSA Contributions to the IAEA,” April 2009, www.nnsa.energy.gov/news/2326.htm.


20. For information on the Fissile Materials Working Group and its activities, see www.fmwg.org.

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