

## Assessing The Nuclear Security Summit

Transcript of a video interview on March 27, 2012, with  
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And

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[Project on Managing the Atom](#)

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**Eben Harrell:** Hello and welcome to the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School. I'm here with **Matthew Bunn**, Associate Professor at the Kennedy School and Co-Principal Investigator at the Project on Managing the Atom. Matt, there was a gathering of world leaders in Korea this week at the nuclear security summit. What were the successes and surprises that came out of the summit?

**Matthew Bunn:** There was a package of relatively modest successes. But there were some real challenges that lead to disappointment, at least from my perspective. The success came from a number of countries announcing that they had already gotten rid of the weapons-usable nuclear material on their soil or that they were going to get rid of particular stocks before the next summit in 2014. You had a broad consensus statement that more or less reaffirmed the commitments from the Washington Nuclear Security Summit two years ago but not much in the way of real new commitments.

Some of the disappointment is that national statements didn't go as far as one would have liked. The United States and Russia, the two countries with 95% of the world's nuclear weapons and most of the world's weapons-usable nuclear material, issued statements that largely said 'what we are doing is what we ought to be doing.' There were few new commitments. It was a missed opportunity for Russia in particular, which has its nuclear stockpile scattered in the world's largest number of buildings and bunkers. They committed to nothing to reduce that huge infrastructure for their nuclear weapons or material or even to upgrade security in their own country.

**Harrell:** What can be done to overcome some of the obstacles now in place for nuclear security between now and 2014, which is the next (and last) security summit?

**Bunn:** It's important to realize that while we are making real progress in improving nuclear security for the highest risk stockpiles -- they are having their security upgraded or are being eliminated entirely -- it won't be true at the end of the four-year effort that all nuclear materials will be secured and accounted for. So nuclear security is really something where we will need to have continuous improvement for the long haul—as long as nuclear weapons and materials continue to exist. Before the next summit there is a lot to be done to overcome the complacency and convincing states that nuclear terrorism is a real threat and that their country needs to do more to secure the nuclear materials that they have. Countries often feel 'oh well what we are doing is good enough' but in many cases it is not.

There is more that you can do with small cooperation between individual countries or groups of countries than you can with a broad consensus summit statement with 50-plus countries involved. You

might be able to get a group of like-minded states to say, 'Here's a high standard for nuclear security that we will all commit to meet and we invite all other countries to join us in meeting that commitment and we will provide help for those countries wishing to come up to that high standard that we agreed to'.

**Harrell:** Looking at the whole framework for security, you've described it as a patchwork. There are a number of different conventions and governing institutions. What can be done on that front? Do we have any chance of getting a unified international framework on nuclear security?

**Bunn:** It would be great to get an overarching framework for nuclear security but it's going to be very difficult to do. Countries have resisted binding legal standards that would specify how secure a nuclear weapon or enough nuclear material needed to make a weapon should be. I think unfortunately we will be working with a patchwork of different initiatives for a while.

Between now and the next nuclear security summit we need to find some way of continuing the dialogue when the security summit process comes to an end. We need some high level international forum where we can discuss nuclear security that can be a driver for action in a way that the nuclear security summit process has been.

**Harrell:** You've already discussed Russia briefly. One of the other areas that you have identified as having high risk nuclear stocks—not necessarily because of poor security but because of the threats they face—is Pakistan. What next for Pakistan? They seem to be prickly about allowing international help. What can we do to help secure material there?

**Bunn:** There have been major improvements in Pakistan over the past 15 years, including substantial cooperation with the United States. But Pakistan remains extremely non-transparent about what they are doing. They are very concerned about guarding their stockpile from Indian strikes or American seizure as well as from Islamic extremists and so they don't let U.S. experts actually go to their nuclear sites. There are still opportunities for expanded cooperation to improve security but at the same time you need action to stabilize the government and reduce the capability of the adversaries in Pakistan—of the terrorists that are operating in Pakistan. I think there is no level of nuclear security that you could get to that would result in a low risk if you didn't also constrain the threats that those nuclear security systems are trying to protect against.

**Harrell:** Can you talk about the threat and how it might have changed since the first security summit. How is it evolving? We've had U.S. leaders talking about al Qaeda being on the verge of strategic defeat; we have the death of Osama bin Laden. Can you talk about that and its implication for nuclear security?

**Bunn:** There is really good news and bad news. The really good news is that the risk that al Qaeda itself could put together a project as complicated as a nuclear bomb project probably has been substantially reduced. Not eliminated but substantially reduced. Why not eliminated? The person who was in charge of their nuclear bomb project—which progressed as far as testing of conventional explosives for their bomb in Afghanistan—is still at large and several senior figures who were involved in that bomb project are still at large and we have no idea where they are.

But the bigger picture is that al Qaeda is one of at least two or possibly even three terrorist groups that have seriously pursued nuclear weapons over the last twenty years. We can't expect that they will be the last. The issue of nuclear terrorism remains a genuine threat. That is why we need to have a focus on continuing improvement in nuclear security.

The bad news is that many countries have reduced their feeling of urgency about this issue because of the progress in defeating al Qaeda. So we may have an even higher hill to climb to convince countries that they must do more on nuclear security.

**Harrell:** The final element of nuclear security that you have identified as being of biggest concern and in need of large action is the presence of research reactors that use highly enriched uranium for fuel. Highly enriched uranium can also be used to fuel nuclear bombs. These research reactors are often at civilian facilities that don't have as strong a security apparatus as military facilities. What did we see at the summit on this issue and what can be done next?

**Bunn:** One of the important steps taken on research reactors was an agreement between the U.S. and the Europeans to shift the production of medical isotopes from using highly enriched uranium targets to low enriched uranium that can't be used in a nuclear bomb. The big producers are South Africa, which has already begun the switch, Belgium and the Netherlands, which agreed to the switch in the summit statement, and Canada, which didn't agree to switch but will likely shut down its isotope production reactors within a couple of years because they are very old. That now will leave Russia, which is just coming into the market with isotopes made with highly enriched uranium, as the last remaining big producer using highly enriched uranium. We need to work on Russia to convince them to convert that production so that we can end the use of highly enriched uranium for medical isotopes.

What we saw at the summit is a lot of places with small amounts of material agreeing to give it up. What we didn't see is a lot of action on the places with the big quantities of nuclear material, with the exception of Ukraine which had announced that it eliminated all the highly enriched uranium on its soil. What I'd like to see as we move to the next summit is a commitment from each country that has highly enriched uranium, plutonium or nuclear weapons on its soil to examine in depth every single place where those stockpiles exist and ask 'do we still need this place? Can we do without it? Do the benefits of keeping this stuff at this place outweigh the costs and the risks?'

If we can convince countries to put stringent security requirements in place it will provide more effective security that will be sustained for the long haul. If it is legally required it will also drive up the cost of

having highly enriched uranium or plutonium at each site and give facilities an incentive for giving up that material. That's happened in the United States where there has been a huge consolidation of the number places where there is highly enriched uranium or plutonium because our security regulations have driven up the costs of maintaining that material.

**Harrell:** Well, Matt, I think we've covered most of the main issues. We have a website at the Belfer Center that will cover these issues and others and has a variety of papers by you on this topic. It's [www.nuclearsummit.org](http://www.nuclearsummit.org). Thank you very much for talking about this with us today.