Nuclear Security: Obama's Sole Achievement in an Uninspiring Nuclear Record

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Every American President in the post-War era has sought to leave behind a legacy of a policy imprint in shaping global nuclear norms and structures, along with reinforcing the primacy of the US nuclear posture. Cold War era Presidents oscillated between perfecting the American deterrent and maintaining a nuclear edge over adversaries, while later day Presidents attempted to harness the promise of a peace dividend by promoting non-proliferation and arms control policies. Relevant to this record of US predominance are radical conceptions like the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) and Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) which shaped nuclear affairs during the Cold War, while George Bush Jr.'s "counter-proliferation" doctrine came with the scope of recalibrating nuclear politics in the post-Cold War period.

Bush espoused the shifting away of the US national security strategy from Cold War doctrines and formulating an anti-proliferation framework wherein violators were to be penalised and the opportunities for proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) mitigated through a network of US-led initiatives.[1] Barack Obama comes last in this line by propounding a nuclear security culture, whose permeation, he believes, will make the world a much safer place. As this Nobel-haloed

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President runs the last year of his time at the White House, the final Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) that he hosted in Washington D.C. retains questions on what this initiative has achieved, what its future will be, and whether something new will emerge to supplant it? Further, will the NSS compensate for an otherwise failed nuclear vision that Obama promised to deliver?

How it Came About

During his first presidential campaign, Obama contended that the biggest security risk of the 21st century did not come from a rogue state lashing out with missiles, but from a terrorist smuggling a crude nuclear device across borders. Dealing with the possibilities of WMD resources falling into the hands of terrorists was, thus, declared to be among his top priorities as President. In his historic Prague speech of 2009, Obama announced a new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world within four years, by setting new standards and pursuing new partnerships to lock down these sensitive materials.[2] He proclaimed efforts to break up black markets, detect and intercept materials in transit, and use financial tools to disrupt this dangerous trade. Obama had articulated the broad contours of his nuclear security plan as including: (a) securing nuclear weapons and ensuring all smuggling channels are plugged; (b) strengthening policing and interdiction efforts; (c) strengthening nuclear threat reduction measures; (d) phasing out highly-enriched uranium from the civil sector; and (e) building state capacities to prevent theft, diversion or spread of nuclear materials. At Prague, Obama had also talked about turning efforts such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT) into durable international institutions through "cooperative enhancement".

Such references to the Bush Administration initiatives were relevant and had a political context. PSI was among the counter-proliferation initiatives that represented Bush's controversial doctrine promoting

military preemption to tackle proliferation threats and espousing regime change as a means to inhibit autocrats from pursuing WMD resources. That the Bush initiatives did not gain ample global support owing to these characteristics was a factor that influenced Obama's conception that they needed an institutional transformation for widespread acceptance. Though it was widely felt that Obama could reverse his predecessor's policies, these references to Bush's initiatives displayed acceptance of their cumulative impact on the proliferation landscape and that the objectives espoused by Obama – interdiction, policing, transportation security, etc. – demanded a level of reliance on existing programmes.

Suffice it to also posit that Obama's nuclear security vision could not have gained the traction or ease of progress that it achieved in six years without the foundations already created by Bush's counter-proliferation initiatives. Simply so, the NSS started with the promise of integrating many Bush-era initiatives, but went on to chart a distinct trajectory. With issues like legality of interdiction and lack of support in major capitals, Obama jettisoned 'counter-proliferation' as a model altogether and instead vouched for those with a multilateral character, mainly, the GICNT, and shifted the operational fulcrum of policing and interdiction roles from PSI to INTERPOL and national security agencies.

While announcing the NSS in Prague, Obama clarified that this summit would form part of efforts for greater institutionalisation of initiatives like the GICNT – his first endorsement of this Bush-era initiative.[3] In a message to the 2009 GICNT plenary, Obama called for greater global participation and implementation of its principles to upgrade it into an *"enduring international institution"*.[4] Hence, it was expected that the NSS could elevate the GICNT as the nodal initiative to combat nuclear terrorism. Instead, GICNT ended up among the many partnerships, including the G8 Global Partnership, in the global nuclear security architecture, which also included the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), INTERPOL, besides

drawing strength from the two international covenants – the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM) and its 2005 amendment, and the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorist (ICSANT).

Nuclear Security Summit: Achievements and Failures

Triumph of Multilateralism

The perceptible success of NSS could be attributed to Obama's leadership in bringing together a wide cross-section of nations (and their leaders) for a nuclear venture, outside the UN framework, and yet managing to rope in most of the international organisations, including the UN, IAEA and INTERPOL, to support the initiative. The more significant aspect though is that the NSS nearly succeeded in upholding the spirit of multilateralism, but for the minor shortcoming that a handful of Washington's bête noires, namely Iran and North Korea, were kept outside the framework of the summit. That the NSS took a multilateral character despite being a US initiative once again reinforces the fundamental feature of the nuclear order that the hegemon determines, shapes or influences its normative character to the extent that its political preferences dominate the proceedings and outcomes, as evident in the conspicuous omissions as well as the boycotts at the final summit. While these features may echo the kind of impediments the Bush Administration faced in pushing its initiatives, Obama had outperformed his predecessor in garnering greater multilateral support for the NSS and instilling a global nuclear security culture.

A Nuclear Security Culture

By that standard, the notable accomplishment of the NSS is that it has set in motion a process of norm construction and its subsequent cascading, wherein securitisation of the nuclear infrastructure and building firewalls

against inimical access is being adopted as an operational culture by countries that seek to be in the nuclear mainstream. The four summits, adorned by the heads of states, have indisputably contributed to this normative process taking shape and being institutionalised at the state and international levels. Leaders, cutting across political and ideological differences, spearheaded their national momentum in favour of a nuclear security culture, keen to be in the good books of the US, and not wanting to be seen against a normative tide, which could prove detrimental, if resisted. The Washington Summit, with its 12-point communiqué, laid the framework for what emerged as a global nuclear security architecture. The key objectives, as elucidated then, could be paraphrased on the following themes: *maintaining security of nuclear materials, preventing non-state actors from accessing them, establishing national legal and executive frameworks on nuclear security, reducing production of highly-enriched uranium and conversion of reactors to low-enriched uranium mode, supporting the (legal) conventions as essential elements of the global nuclear security architecture, supporting nuclear security initiatives of the UN, IAEA and other bodies, including the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and Nuclear Facilities (INFCIRC/225/Rev.5), the G8-led Global Partnership and the GICNT, and building the capacity of nuclear security cooperation and practices, etc.*[5] A detailed work-plan was also agreed upon at the summit to pursue these objectives.[6] The Seoul Summit (2012), while reiterating the principles of the Washington communiqué, expanded its scope on nuclear safety, forensics, transportation safety, illicit trafficking and information security, among others.[7] The Hague Summit (2014) made advances by incorporating the roles of the nuclear industry and information and cyber security in this process.[8]

The summit in itself provided new templates for international cooperation, with heads of states representing their countries to deliberate on a singular theme – nuclear terrorism/security – and their bureaucracies engaging in proactive dialogue (through Sherpa meetings). With the

number increasing from 47 countries in 2010, around 52 attended the final summit, showcasing their Progress Reports and National Statements, listing their actions of six years – ranging from their national means for physical protection of nuclear material and management of radiological resources, securing transportation of such materials, against illicit trafficking, to ratification of conventions, and establishment of centres of excellence, among others.[9] Some like India went a step ahead by setting up transnational centres for cooperation, namely the Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership (GCNEP) for training, scientific exchanges and sharing best practices.[10] Another unique model that underlines the multilateral impetus of NSS is the Gift Basket system, which represents the numerous operational platforms where nations have volunteered to partner on creating global best practices.[11]

Nuclear Terrorism as the Raison d'être

The two terms associated with the NSS – nuclear security and nuclear terrorism – have their own dialectical complexities. Nuclear security, for example, was for long identified with deterrence-based security strategies and strategic parity among nuclear-armed nations. When Obama introduced nuclear security into the debate, many conflated it with conceptions of safety of the nuclear infrastructure (akin to confusion over safeguards and security). It took a while to calibrate the concept around nuclear terrorism, the physical security of the nuclear infrastructure, illicit trafficking of nuclear materials, etc. This was significant as some nations were worried about the nuclear security paradigm also taking an arms control turn or getting mired in the politics of non-proliferation.

An example is that of Pakistan, which apparently hopped into the NSS bandwagon at the first go, apprehending the possibility of being targeted for its infamy of being a hub of terrorism and proliferation – the ideal breeding ground for nuclear terrorism. Pakistan's participation at the NSS seems a tough grind: like others, Pakistan also showcases its

measures of physical protection and means against nuclear terrorism, including a centre of excellence, but refuses to make any reference of significance to nuclear terrorism in any of its national statements or progress reports. As the debate veered towards the potency of the nuclear terror challenge, the Pakistani leadership skipped the final summit, fearing inimical references. Even India felt the jitters of the arms control spin-off of the NSS when Obama referred to the need for the South Asian nuclear neighbours to reduce their arsenals and not make military doctrines that move "continuously in the wrong direction". India, however, dismissed the remarks as "a lack of understanding of India's defence posture", and claimed the context of the remarks was the development of tactical nuclear arsenals (read, Pakistan's NASR).[12]

The other aspect is about the threat of nuclear terrorism itself, which the Western world has treated as the pivotal contemporary global security challenge while many others see it more as alarmist hype, though none discounts its existence. The NSS has managed to place nuclear terrorism as the fulcrum of the global nuclear security paradigm. This is despite the assumption that none of the terrorist groups have the wherewithal to access a nuclear weapon, though the fear persists that some groups could improvise a dirty bomb using radiological or fissile materials. Simply so, the spectre of terrorists accessing such resources has caused perceptions of nightmarish scenarios, especially in the Western capitals, further compounded by recent reports that dreaded groups like the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) could have targeted or infiltrated Belgian nuclear facilities.[13] Notwithstanding these threat perceptions, there is no tangible evidence to confirm the possibility of terrorist groups accessing such material, though no one can hazard the risk of rejecting such a possibility. For many years, it was feared that Al Qaeda could undertake a nuclear terror strike or that rogue elements in the Pakistan Army would access its arsenal. It is, hence, worthwhile to postulate whether the NSS has further hyped this threat or brought some realism into the debate. Or rather, was

it an alternate means to ensure that countries cut their Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) stockpiles – as a latent way to address proliferation?

Gaining Legal and Operational Muscle

One of the highlights of the concluding summit was that it coincided with the ratification by 102 states of the 2005 Amendment to the CPPNM, which enables its entry into force in May 2016.[14] While the 1987 Convention covers physical protection of nuclear material for peaceful purposes during international transport, the amendment broadens its scope to cover protection in domestic use, storage and transport, thus, making it legally binding for states to establish a physical protection system, besides broadening the range of offences. That the entry into force of the CPPNM coincided with the final summit raised optimism that the global nuclear security architecture is destined to be further strengthened, along with other conventions like ICSANT, which entered into force in 2007. This is besides the range of operational activities including capacity building, training and table top exercises undertaken by the 90-member GICNT and the G-8 Partnership.

The range of these activities, mechanisms and entities points to an unprecedented tradition of international cooperation that has been developed over a period of half a decade to tackle a threat scenario that is commonly shared by states. While Obama's original plan of securing all loose nuclear materials globally in four years might remain a tall order, an NSS fact sheet claims that HEU and plutonium have been completely removed or down-blended from more than 50 facilities in 30 countries, besides on-going efforts by many countries, including Ukraine, Japan, Taiwan and UK to remove HEU from their facilities.[15] Besides these reports, the general claims about the efficacy of the NSS measures revolve around the steps taken by individual nations to augment their nuclear security practices and systems. This has led many observers to infer whether the momentum will be lost after the final summit. Some have pointed

to the absence of comprehensive and uniform international standards that could be universally adhered to, and that the NSS failed to cover major global stocks of weapons-usable nuclear material under military programmes.[16] Others feel the scope for continuous improvement of the global nuclear security may not be tangible as the 2016 Communiqué does not offer any firm commitments for states to carry on, and that action plans for the global institutions offer little new from what is already being done.[17]

Future Trajectory of the Nuclear Security Summit

The prevalent sentiment during the final summit was about what its future direction will be. Observers wondered whether the initiative would be an Obama legacy that could end with his tenure at the White House. No major players came forward to take up this momentum, nor are the presidential candidates making any reference to this scheme or its prospects if they make it to the presidency. States that have invested considerably on this venture vouch for the IAEA to carry this movement forward through the ministerial-level conferences held every year and functional partnerships through various centres of excellence. While doubts will persist on whether the movement will continue to receive the high level of attention from leaderships and bureaucracies or whether it will slip into a state of complacency, the question that needs to be posed is: why has Obama sought to promote some form of institutionalisation of the summit to ensure its continuity?

The obvious answer could be that the NSS movement may be the only significant area in nuclear policy-making on which Obama could claim a legacy. Considering that Obama received a Nobel Prize for his pacifistic speech promoting global peace and disarmament, it could be poor reflection on his presidential record that he could hardly move an inch on any of the key measures, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) or the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). Even those

initiatives, which were taken by other actors to promote disarmament goals, namely, the proposals at the Main Committee meeting of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in 2010 for a disarmament timeline by 2015,[18] and the humanitarian pledge[19] promoting the cause of a nuclear weapons ban treaty, were heavily resisted and subverted by US delegations at all these fora. Assuming that future leaders like Hillary Clinton may attempt to chart their own vision on the nuclear policy front, one could speculate whether the benefits of this Obama legacy would sustain for the years to come.

Notes

1. Major articulations of the Bush doctrine and its nuclear tenets were made in his remarks at the National Defence University; for more, see "Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University," Washington D.C., May 1, 2001, available at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/05/20010501-10.html
2. Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague, April 5, 2009, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered
3. President Bush and President Putin launched the initiative in Moscow in July 2006; see "The Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism – Fact Sheet," US Department of State, available at www.state.gov/t/isn/c18406.htm
4. Remarks by C.S. Eliot Kang, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, at the 2009 Plenary Meeting of the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, The Hague, Netherlands, June 16, 2009.
5. Text of communiqué available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/communiqu-washington-nuclear-security-summit
6. Text of work plan available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/work-plan-washington-nuclear-security-summit
7. The Seoul Summit communiqué is available at www.thenuclearsecuritysummit.org/userfiles/Seoul%20Communique_FINAL.pdf (accessed in August 2012).
8. The Hague Summit communiqué is available at http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/237002.pdf
9. See reports and statements of each summit at http://www.nss2016.org/ .
10. For more on the Global Centre, see http://www.gcnep.gov.in/; see more descriptions in the Indian Progress Reports: http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/235440.pdf (2014) and http://www.nss2016.org/document-center-docs/2016/3/31/national-progress-report-india (2016)
11. For a glimpse of the Gift Baskets proposed at various summits, see http://www.nss2016.org/2016-gift-baskets/ (2016) and http://www.nss2016.org/2014/giftbaskets (2014)

12. Official Spokesperson's response to question regarding President Obama's remarks at the Nuclear Security Summit Press Conference on India and Pakistan's military doctrines (April 04, 2016), available at http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/26596/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_question_regarding_President_Obamas_remarks_at_the_Nuclear_Security_Summit_Press_Conference_on_India_and_Pakistans_
13. Alissa J. Rubin and Milan Schreuer, "Belgium Fears Nuclear Plants are Vulnerable," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2016.
14. "Key Nuclear Security Agreement to Enter Into Force on May 08," available at https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/key-nuclear-security-agreement-to-enter-into-force-on-8-may
15. See Fact Sheet at http://www.nss2016.org/document-center-docs/2016/3/31/fact-sheet-the-nuclear-security-summits-securing-the-world-from-nuclear-terrorism
16. Jonathan Herbach and Samantha Pitts-Kiefer, "More Work to Do: A Pathway for Future Progress on Strengthening Nuclear Security," *Arms Control Today*, October 2015.
17. Matthew Bunn, "The Nuclear Security Summit: Wins, Losses, and Draws," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 07, 2016.
18. See A. Vinod Kumar, "Promises, Compromises and a Tiebreaker: NPT RevCon 2010 was an Otiose Event," *IDSA Issue Brief*, June 09, 2010, available at http://www.idsa.in/system/files/IB_NPTRevCon2010_avkumar.pdf
19. For an analysis of the humanitarian initiative, see "Reframing the Disarmament Discourse: Can the Humanitarian Paradigm make a Difference?" IDSA, *Strategic Comments*, May 26, 2015.