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The Nuclear Security Summit and South Korea's Growing International Role

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On March 26-27, 2012, South Korea successfully held the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit. This was the largest diplomatic gathering ever held in South Korea with fifty-three countries and four international non-governmental organizations participating. Alongside the summit, President Lee Myung-bak held twenty-seven bilateral talks which helped to elevate South Korea's international role.

The Seoul Summit has been judged to have produced a more concrete outcome that has strongly supported the achievements made at the Washington Summit in 2010. The result is the Seoul Communiqué, which states that nuclear disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy are the shared goals of humanity while also reconfirming the commitment to seeking a safer world for all and sharing the objective of nuclear security.

Moreover, the communiqué stresses the fundamental responsibility of all countries, consistent with their respective national and international obligations, to maintain effective security of all nuclear material, which includes nuclear weapons and nuclear facilities under their control, as well as to prevent non-state actors from acquiring such materials and from obtaining information or technology required to use them for malicious purposes. The communiqué further reaffirms that measures to strengthen nuclear security will not hamper the rights of states to develop and utilize nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

With North Korea's nuclear threat still overshadowing the Korean Peninsula, the

summit had some meaningful implications. South Korea will have undoubtedly enhanced its national image from passive recipient to an active rule-maker in international norms.

In preparing for the summit, the South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) focused on comprehensive and action-oriented measures under the belief that by only transforming political commitments from the Washington Summit into action would guarantee the success of the summit. As a result, the Seoul Summit has demonstrated that the promises from the 2010 Washington Summit have now advanced to fruitful outcomes. The seventy-two commitments from that summit have now been almost realized with only a few still to be finalized. In addition, the Seoul Summit has proven itself to be the transition point for global nuclear security moving from political declaration to concrete implementation. The summit itself has also widened its agenda including nuclear safety, the safe use of nuclear energy and radioactive materials, therefore able to address some of the key issues raised following the Fukushima accident.

Despite the achievements, some limitations are evident when looking at the preparations for the summit and its aftermath. In the build-up to the summit in South Korea, there were problems in communication between state and people. While the summit is dedicated to preventing nuclear terrorism, some questioned why South Korea was hosting a summit that did not address issues closer to home such as the North Korean nuclear issue

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or the U.S.-Korea nuclear energy agreement controversy. Such criticism required strong justification of why South Korea was hosting the summit. Another area of difficulty was that nuclear security itself actually lacks a clear definition even among experts. To cope with such questions, MOFAT sought for advice and creative ideas by hosting advisory board meetings during the preparation for the summit.

One of the most important future tasks is how the Nuclear Security Summit will become a sustainable nonproliferation mechanism rather than an occasional diplomatic showcase. The next Nuclear Security Summit will be held in the Netherlands in 2014, but as yet no further plans have been detailed. Thus it is critical to think about how to make the current summit into an international regime. From a variety of viable options on the table, two are worth considering in this regard. The first is to make the best use of the already existing G8 Global Partnership so as to continue the achievements of the past two nuclear security summits. The G8 Global Partnership was launched at the G8 Summit in 2002 for with currently twenty-three members have raised 21 billion dollars. The Global Partnership was intended only to operate for a limited period of twenty years, but its timeline was recently extended at the 2011 G8 summit in France. An extension of the U.S. Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program, the Global Partnership is a multilateral initiative that aims to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Since 2005, South Korea has participated and contributed 5.5 million dollars to the Global Partnership. The agendas of Global Partnership and CTR are also safe maintenance and disposal of nuclear

materials and nuclear prevention, consistent with the cause of the Seoul Summit. Therefore, there is the possibility of linking these arrangements. Another is to include the agendas of nonproliferation in the already existing G20 regime South Korea hosted in late 2010. The G20 member states make up for 90 percent of nuclear weapons around the world, 70 percent of global GDP, and 80 percent of the world population. Although originally focused on international economics and global governance, the G20 regime is also well suited to take on nuclear security issues if the member states jointly emphasize a shared vision that nuclear security is the key to global governance.

Finally, we should think about how the non-binding Seoul Communiqué, the inherent limitation of the summit, can develop into international norms. The successful removal and disposal of nuclear materials depends upon the will of the member states to take action. At the Seoul Summit, it was agreed to activate entry into force of the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material by 2014 and encourage a voluntary use of highly enriched uranium at a minimum level. However, the feasibility of these efforts has been questioned due to the lack of binding enforcement. Much then will depend upon how leaders across the globe may direct attention to the importance of nuclear security issue.■

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