

Smart Talk No. 24

Presenter

William H. Tobey

Moderator

Sook-Jong Lee

Discussants

Seongwhun Cheon
Chaesung Chun
Jihwan Hwang
Bong-geun Jun
Young Ho Kim
Sang Hyun Lee

This product presents a
policy-oriented summary
of the Smart Talk.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158
Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

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Stemming the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism and Proliferation, Globally and in Northeast Asia

May 16, 2012

On May 16, 2012, the East Asia Institute invited Mr. William H. Tobey (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs) to discuss on nuclear security and safety issues. The following are some of the main points of the presentation and the subsequent discussion with South Korean experts and scholars.

Summary of the Seminar

The emerging threat of nuclear terrorism has called for the international community to assess and act on the nuclear security and safety matters as a collective issue. Following non-proliferation and disarmament initiatives, there have been varied efforts to advance nuclear security. Mr. Tobey began his presentation by evaluating the Nuclear Security Summit process and outlining policy recommendations for the next summit in 2014. In his view, the past two summits have been meaningful in that they have successfully built consensus among world leaders and reaffirmed national commitments to enhance nuclear security. On the other hand, international cooperation has been hindered due to the lack of shared assessment on nuclear terrorism threats and of an agreed baseline of protection, such as the minimum standard of security for nuclear material.

In overcoming these limitations, Mr. Tobey urged on the need for collective action towards improving nuclear security on international and state levels. On the international level, he suggested that it is still crucial for a

majority to adopt a communiqué at the Nuclear Security Summit, even though it would most likely remain non-binding and vague. In that vein, he also suggested countries to minimize the difference of opinions over reprocessing and over the relative importance of safety and security of nuclear materials. Furthermore, individual countries must try to agree on and adhere to the baseline for a minimum level of security, which would apply to weapons-grade material and would be necessary to prevent nuclear theft. On the state level, he recommended that countries learn from past failures, notably the 18 known cases of theft of weapons-grade fissile material. He argued that local intelligence agencies and authorities should be the main actors in developing and assessing the design basis threat (DBT) to drive the risk “as low as reasonably achievable.” Finally, countries should declare and limit the use of fissile materials, such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU), and consolidate storage sites.

Elaborating further, Mr. Tobey argued that countries must strategize carefully for consultations to progress on nuclear security, particularly if the next Nuclear Security Summit turns out to be the last one. In regards to the future prospects of the summit, Mr. Tobey proposed two possibilities. The first prospect is that the summit could be folded into the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which would give the process the same degree of legitimacy, but would pose bureaucratic problems. The second option would be for the summit to be integrated into

the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT), which would be reformatted to include the nuclear security pillar with more flexibility and effectiveness.

During the discussion, the main focus was on the debate of whether South Korea should pursue nuclear reprocessing. There is some strong support for this in South Korea which was reflected in some of the discussants' questions. In responding to the points on reprocessing and energy security, Mr. Tobey stated that many countries have turned away from reprocessing, due to its economic impracticality. Instead, long term dry cask storage has been accepted as a more favorable and viable option. He also pointed out that countries need to consider the precedential value during the process of developing a nuclear program. ■

About the Speaker

William H. Tobey

Mr. William H. Tobey is a senior fellow of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. He was most recently Deputy Administrator for Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation at the National Nuclear Security Administration. There, he managed the U.S. government's largest program to prevent nuclear proliferation and terrorism by detecting, securing, and disposing of dangerous nuclear material. Mr. Tobey also served on the National Security Council Staff in three administrations, in defense policy, arms control, and counter-proliferation positions. He has participated in international negotiations ranging from the START talks with the Soviet Union, to the Six Party Talks with North Korea. He also has extensive experience in investment banking and venture capital.

Moderator

Sook-Jong Lee, East Asia Institute

Discussants

Seongwhun Cheon

- Korea Institute for National Unification

Chaesung Chun

- Seoul National University

Jihwan Hwang

- University of Seoul

Bong-geun Jun

- Korea National Diplomatic Academy

Young Ho Kim

- Korea National Defense University

Sang Hyun Lee

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade