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Seoul Nuclear Security Summit: Implications for Developing Global Governance

Chaesung Chun, Jin Ho Jeon, Sung-bae Kim, Sang Hyun Lee, and Seongho Sheen

Knowledge-Net for a Better World

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2012 EAI Special Report

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2012. 2





Executive Summary

International relations in the twenty-first century are going through fundamental changes in which various transnational problems need to be dealt with by multi-level actors. The authority of state actors are diminishing while non-state actors such as international institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and global civil society are becoming more powerful with stakes in many issues, emphasizing the rising impact of global governance. The emergence of the G20 summit meetings to cope with the global financial crisis and various climate conferences to deal with climate change are some examples of the rise of global governance. International security regimes are known as very difficult to form because the stakes are so high and states usually have difficulty in reaching an agreement. However, common security threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction facilitate the adoption of the logic of global governance even in the area of security cooperation. It is hard to imagine having the top-level decision makers from more than 50 countries in one place to discuss security issues unless international relations go through fundamental changes.

In that sense, the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), which first took place in 2010, heralds the strengthening of global governance in the area of security issues. The NSS first derived out of a new approach by the United States to the threat of nuclear terrorism. While nuclear terrorism has always been a major concern since the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks renewed focus in the United States

on what is one of the greatest threats to homeland security. Under the Bush administration that approach was mainly a unilateral one that targeted directly terrorist groups, their bases overseas, and their sponsors. Such policies though created an international backlash against the United States that harmed its image overseas and strained alliances. Furthermore, such unilateral approaches also contributed toward an already massive budget deficit that since the global financial crisis of 2008 has placed a massive constraint on available resources to the United States.

As a result of these difficulties and limitations, the Obama administration renewed its grand strategy stretching to national security strategies coined as multilateral engagement policy. In the area of nuclear matters, it conceived of the Nuclear Security Summit as a new approach to confront the threat of nuclear terrorism. Rather than targeting terrorists directly, this new strategy seeks to take on the tools used by terrorists, such as loose nuclear materials. As a multilateral arrangement, the Nuclear Security Summit also seeks to overcome the difficulties caused by unilateral approaches.

President Barack Obama, during his Prague speech in April 2009 where he promoted a “world without nuclear weapons,” stressed the importance of nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The Nuclear Security Summit is therefore a U.S.-led global regime that represents the achievements of the Obama admin-



istration to launch a broad and comprehensive strategy to counter nuclear terrorism.

Theoretically, international institutions can be created by the leading powers (realism), by common interests institutionalized thereafter (liberalism), or by common understanding and cultural factors constituting the concepts of harmonious national interests (constructivism). In the case of the Nuclear Security Summit the factor of power is most significant in the formation of the Summit because it was largely created through the U.S. hegemony. However, we cannot ignore the fact that it is also the collective interest of the participating states to prevent the illicit trafficking of nuclear material and attacks on nuclear facilities by terrorists or other groups.

Also as the summit develops we expect that unified values and rules of the participant states in countering nuclear terrorism will have broader foundations, encompassing a factor of identity. The Nuclear Security Summit could therefore be regarded as both a process of expanding U.S. interests and power while also spreading the norms of nuclear security. The agenda for the first Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington, D.C in 2010, “Physical Protection of Nuclear Material” was very narrow and specific which made it easier to reach a consensus on the mutual interests and identities of the participating states. The NSS as an institution, however, has the potential to expand with time to address not only the simple agenda of protecting nuclear material, but also tackle issues of greater diversity such as those pertaining to nuclear security and other general nuclear-related issues. The NSS slowly transforms itself from an American-led institution to a more universally based normative one to deal with more common issues and to advance new agendas.

One example is the effort of the participating parties to include the issue of nuclear safety in the Nuclear Security Summit. So far, nuclear security and nuclear safety have long been regarded as fundamentally different issues that could never coexist. This all changed following the nuclear accident at the Fukushima plant in March 2011 which led to a new effort to perceive of them as interconnected issues. Despite this new focus and attention, there is still no model which can determine how the two concepts can be technically defined and linked. Given the difficulties for introducing a comprehensive concept which encompasses the issue of nuclear security at the Seoul summit, efforts need to be made to seek an interface between nuclear security and nuclear safety. If specific plans for international and regional cooperation on the safety of nuclear energy are adopted at the Seoul summit and the NSS is consequently able to function as a global governance regime, the Seoul summit will certainly be remembered for such an important achievement.

The impact of the Nuclear Security Summit on relationships among major powers could be another side-effect of this useful gathering. The U.S.-China relationship, which will be the most important factor for the second decade of the twenty-first century, is expected to develop toward common interests in dealing with the agendas at the Seoul summit. The relationship is generally characterized by tension and competition on many global issues due to China’s economic rise and the relative decline of the United States. However, nuclear issues are different as China does not regard the United States as a competitor in terms of nuclear strategy. The nuclear strategy of the United States is based upon “first-strike capabil-



ity,” while China’s nuclear strategy is in clear contrast as it is based upon the principle of “no first use.” The position of the United States and China on the issue of nuclear energy is also quite different. Operating 104 nuclear power plants, the United States is the largest nuclear power in the world. Currently, the United States produces 30% of the world’s total nuclear energy and 20% of the U.S. total power output. Despite accounting for such a large percentage of nuclear energy, the United States has not actually constructed a nuclear power plant since the Three Mile Island accident in 1979. The Obama administration’s effort to build the first nuclear power plant in almost 30 years is currently at a standstill owing to the concerns on nuclear power since the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident.

China is pushing the use of nuclear energy in order to meet its massive energy needs and to solve various environmental problems such as air pollution caused by coal plants. China currently operates only 14 nuclear power plants, but is expected to increase the number to become one of the largest nuclear energy producers by 2030 with more than 100 plants. So far, 25 plants are under construction and more than 50 are in the planning stage.

China is expected to approach the Nuclear Security Summit from the perspective of U.S.-China cooperation. In other words, China is participating not because it is exclusively concerned with nuclear security, but rather to regulate U.S.-China relations. For Beijing, resumption of the Six-Party Talks to resolve the North Korean Nuclear Crisis is at the core of its national interests. Given how the safety of nuclear energy has also become an important issue in China as it plans to increase the number of power

plants, Beijing is likely to go along with the agenda pushed forward by South Korea and Japan on nuclear safety.

South Korea has pursued the policy of “Global Korea.” Based on its enhanced national power and its commitment to adopt a strategy of global and regional middle-powermanship, South Korea aims at fulfilling the roles of convener, facilitator, and agenda-setter for global issues. Some of the objectives in hosting the Seoul summit in March 2012 are: to contribute to the strengthening of global security governance, to facilitate strategic cooperation among major powers with special focus on the United States and China, to consolidate the ROK-U.S. alliance, and to refresh South Korea’s efforts to develop nuclear security agendas and also resolve issues related to the North Korean nuclear problem.

A successful outcome at the Seoul summit then would contribute extensively toward South Korea’s long-term diplomatic strategy as a middle-power. First, success in hosting the Seoul summit, following the successes of the 2010 G20 summit and the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness will certainly improve South Korea’s reputation and status as a middle-power which is able to mediate between different countries with conflicting interests. Second, given how the Nuclear Security Summit is a U.S.-led regime, a successful hosting of the Seoul summit will help to solidify ROK-U.S. relations. Third, the summit could become an opportunity to resolve North Korea-related issues including the nuclear problem.

For the North Korean nuclear issue, South Korea is well aware that it is not directly related to the agenda of the Seoul summit. Now almost twenty years old, the nuclear issue enters into a new stage



with the death of Kim Jong-Il in late 2011, and the beginning of a new regime under his son Kim Jong-un. With the need to improve the living standards of the North Korean people in order to prove himself as an able and legitimate heir, Kim Jong-un will seek to elicit outside economic assistance mainly from South Korea and the United States. North Korea's nuclear programs will be then useful as an efficient bargaining tool to gain economic support from outside powers. As the North Korean nuclear program is of international concern not just for proliferation, but also possible transfer to illegitimate actors, global efforts to avert this trend will continue.

However, it is quite natural to expect that more emphasis will be given to the prevention of nuclear terrorism by non-state actors, making it difficult to place the North Korean issue at the top of the agenda as it is in essence related to nuclear proliferation by a state actor. In such a case, the more sensible approach for South Korea would be to strategically utilize the Seoul summit as an opportunity to take the lead in the formulation of global security norms.

Furthermore, South Korea and the United States will be well-placed as partner countries to draw attention to the threat of North Korea's nuclear program, state their official position on North Korea's denuclearization, and distribute these proposals through press releases. The Seoul summit is also a good opportunity for both bilateral and multilateral forms of discussions on the North Korean nuclear issue as the heads of states from the member countries of the Six-Party Talks, except North Korea, will be present.

The South Korean government must set the following three objectives in relation to the specific agendas of the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit.

Objective-1: In the run-up to the Seoul summit, the South Korean government should present a vision on nuclear security that will contribute toward the realization of the primary objective, “a world without nuclear and biological terrorism.”

The 2010 Nuclear Security Summit was focused mainly on the “declaration” of the fundamental principles and direction of nuclear security, as such there was little substantive contents at the Washington summit. By contrast, the Seoul summit will be an opportunity to make a significant progress toward “implementation” of these principles.

Objective-2: South Korea must ensure the right focus on issues during the summit that covers both nuclear security and nuclear safety while also adhering to the contents raised at the Washington summit.

In light of the recent Fukushima accident which focused international attention on the issue of nuclear safety, the Seoul summit should look at ways in which both nuclear security and nuclear safety can help prevent nuclear and biological terrorism. This means that the agenda should not move too far away from the main focus on nuclear security and the issues brought up at the last summit in Washington such as counter nuclear terrorism, protection of nuclear material and facilities, and the illicit trade of nuclear material. For example, South Korea should continue discussion on cooperative measures for strengthening the protection of radioactive material which was insufficiently covered at the Washington summit.



Objective-3: South Korea must ensure that the participating states will strengthen previous efforts and agreements on nuclear security.

In order to ensure the long-term outcome of the Seoul summit that will establish a platform for the next Nuclear Security Summit, South Korea must work to develop a framework that will strengthen previous international agreements. Some of these efforts to strengthen international agreements on nuclear security could include: regulation of highly enriched uranium, boosting the International Convention on Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism and the Amendment to the Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials, increased funding for the International Atomic Energy Agency, and enhanced training for nuclear security management.

To fulfill these objectives, the following measures must be taken:

1. For the long-run, it will be crucial to establish norms of nuclear safety, nuclear security and non-proliferation and train human resources to lead this process.

The importance of establishing international norms to ensure nuclear security is critical for the long-term durability of the Nuclear Security Summit. Part of this effort should also include the development and training of human resources that can lead the

way in establishing some of these norms in nuclear security.

2. The Seoul summit should aim to be more diversified by hosting conferences involving experts, corporations and non-governmental organizations.

Broad participation in international summits requires not only different countries but also non-state actors who can provide expertise as well as contribute toward forming a wide consensus and establishing international norms. Considering the limitations placed upon the agenda for the summit by the United States in which only states can participate, holding conferences of diverse formats alongside the summit will help support a broader participation and inclusion of non-state actors.

3. South Korea must also invest in preparing for a post-Seoul summit roadmap.

While South Korea will focus much of its energy on the summit itself, it should also consider establishing a post-summit schedule and roadmap. This will not only improve South Korea's role as a middle-power, but also allow South Korea to make meaningful contributions toward developing global governance on nuclear power. Pushing for a roadmap will help to guarantee the success of the next Nuclear Security Summit as well as ensure the implementation of the objectives reached at the Seoul summit.



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- This report is the result of the East Asia Institute's research activity of the Asia Security Initiative Research Center. This report has been translated from the original on February 13, 2012 by Sung Min Yoo and Stephen Ranger.
- Any citation or quotation is prohibited without prior permission of the author.
- The East Asia institute, an Asia Security Initiative core institution, acknowledges the MacArthur Foundation for its generous grant and continued support.
- A modified version of this executive summary is also available at FRIDE's Agora Asia-Europe website (<http://www.fride.org/project/27/agora-asia-europe>). The EAI acknowledges the assistance of the FRIDE's Agora Asia-Europe program in producing this English executive summary.

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