



BULLETIN

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As if Struck by Lightning? The Future of Nuclear Security and the Non-Proliferation System after Crimea

Łukasz Kulesa

The 3rd Nuclear Security Summit, which opened in The Hague on 24 March, was convened to examine progress made in securing vulnerable nuclear materials from the threat of terrorism. The events in Ukraine, though, will not only be a feature of discussions amongst world leaders on the sidelines of the meeting but also should force a review of the direction of wider non-proliferation and arms control efforts. While Ukraine is unlikely to exit the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the prospects for further nuclear reductions in the world have become bleak, with nuclear deterrence now set to play a more visible role in Europe and beyond.

On 24 March, the leaders of 53 countries and four major international organisations gathered in The Hague for the 3rd Nuclear Security Summit to discuss progress in securing nuclear materials against the threat of terrorism or theft. U.S. President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping are among the participants, the Ukrainian delegation was to be headed by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk. The Ukrainian crisis is likely to have a small impact on the summit agenda itself, as it had been agreed months in advance, but it will feature prominently in the meetings and discussions held on the sidelines of the summit.

President Obama announced that a meeting of the G7 states and EU leaders would be convened on the same day as the start of the conference, 24 March. It will serve as an opportunity to exchange views on next steps in relations with Russia, discuss the imposition of new sanctions, and re-structure the work of the group following the *de facto* suspension of the G8 format (the G7 in cooperation with Russia). It would also be an opportunity to reinforce a message of solidarity with Ukraine and issue condemnation of Russia's actions.

The Nuclear Security Summit Process and Ukraine. The goal of securing fissile material that could be used to produce nuclear-capable devices or “dirty” radiological bombs, was first announced by President Obama in his landmark speech in Prague in 2009. The attention then focused primarily on highly enriched uranium and plutonium stocks, estimated at 1,400 tonnes and 500 tonnes, respectively, worldwide. Two high-level summits have already taken place, the first in 2010 in Washington D.C., and the second in 2012 in Seoul. The formula envisioned engaging the leaders of selected countries: those that hold nuclear weapons (except North Korea) or have significant quantities of fissile materials, or those states situated along major land and sea lines of communication.

Ukraine has been considered one of the “success stories” of the NSS process. Ukraine, with the cooperation of the U.S., transferred to Russia the whole of its stock of highly enriched uranium (234 kgs) used in its research reactors, which were then converted to operate with low-enriched uranium (LEU). The increased political attention to Ukraine connected with its participation in NSS helped increase the level of security at the country's nuclear facilities and defence against nuclear trafficking. During the current crisis, Ukraine signalled that it was increasing security measures at its nuclear facilities and had turned to the IAEA for support in this regard, and there are no indications that any incidents compromising security have actually taken place.

Wider Consequences. Many Ukrainians and international observers have been challenging the basic rationale for observing non-proliferation obligations, given the deterioration of the security of the country in recent weeks. The decision to transfer about 3,000 tactical and 1,900 strategic “post-Soviet” nuclear warheads to Russia (completed in 1996) and adhere to NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state has been questioned recently by, among others, three Verkhovna Rada parliamentarians, who filed a motion calling on Ukraine to renounce its NPT membership.

These regrets about “giving up” the country’s nuclear weapons overlook important factors that contributed to Ukraine’s decision in the early 1990s, including opposition by the majority of the population to nuclearisation because of the legacy of the Chernobyl accident, strong pressure from the United States, a condition of denuclearisation placed on political and economic support for Ukraine’s transformation, and, finally, internal Ukrainian assessments regarding the high costs of maintaining independent nuclear weapons capability. Any attempts to keep nuclear weapons under Ukrainian control would have seriously undermined its state-building process. In the current circumstances, the proponents of renouncing NPT are unlikely to influence the position of their government, which understands well the prohibitive costs of challenging its nuclear-free status, especially in terms of losing Western support. Ukraine’s capabilities for a quick nuclear breakout are also non-existent, as it has no enrichment or spent-fuel reprocessing facilities that could produce large quantities of weapons-grade fissile material.

At the same time, the crisis has exposed the illusionary nature of the security assurances provided to Ukraine within the framework of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum by the U.S., the UK, and Russia. In contrast to the security guarantees, these pledges were not backed by specific obligations to take action in case they were breached, especially by one of the signatories. This failure will be noted by countries that are being offered similar assurances in exchange for nuclear disarmament (North Korea), limits on their nuclear programme (Iran), or refraining from engaging in specific proliferation-sensitive activities such as uranium enrichment or reprocessing (Saudi Arabia). They will expect more tangible security guarantees and actions in exchange for changing their policies.

It is unlikely that the crisis over Crimea will be a decisive factor for any country to leave the NPT. The U.S.–Russian legal framework supporting nuclear strategic stability, which includes the New START and INF treaties, also seems solid at this point. Both sides may even be willing now to highlight that despite the tensions, they continue to adhere by their bilateral obligations and can jointly work to resolve proliferation crises, including the Iranian nuclear program and Syrian chemical disarmament. Still, the Ukrainian example will be used by proponents of strengthening nuclear deterrence in Europe, Middle East and Asia. Some countries covered by U.S. nuclear extended deterrence will probably call for more explicit re-confirmation of the U.S. pledges, backed by relevant capabilities and credible military planning. Some governments (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Korea) can move more forcefully in the direction of nuclear hedging, i.e., preparing nuclear infrastructure necessary for a possible nuclear breakout, as well as delivery vehicles suitable for nuclear weapons.

Recommendations for Poland and NATO. Poland has been taking part in the NSS process since the very beginning and has used the momentum from its involvement to such things as speeding the process of converting its “Maria” research reactor in Świerk to LEU and transferring HEU fuel assemblies to Russia. The NSS framework has also provided the opportunity to cooperate with the U.S. and its partners in Central Europe on issues ranging from exchanging information on nuclear security to strengthening border protection against trafficking. The Ukrainian crisis does not undermine the case for minimising the threat connected with nuclear terrorism. It cannot be denied that the elimination of HEU from Ukraine had removed a security challenge that could have further destabilised the situation today. Poland should remain engaged with the NSS process, which foresees another summit planned for 2016 in the United States. Poland should also be looking especially at avenues to include Ukraine in cooperative projects. Nuclear security remains one of the few areas where Western countries and Russia continue to share common interests.

The wider consequences of the Crimea crisis on the non-proliferation regime and on the prospects for nuclear weapons reductions in Europe are more complex. For European NATO members bordering Russia, Poland included, the crisis has served as confirmation that for security guarantees to be credible they need to be backed up by specific capabilities. In the nuclear domain, this would likely translate into continued support for the stationing of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe and the upgrade of B-61 weapons. Still, as long as Russia is not explicitly bringing nuclear weapons into the crisis, e.g. by announcing the re-deployment of tactical weapons from central storage sites to specific units in Western Russia, it is too early to discuss more far-reaching measures, such as the organisation of exercises involving nuclear-related assets (e.g., dual-capable aircraft) or expanding the number of NATO Allies actively engaged in nuclear-sharing arrangements. Deploying U.S. nuclear weapons at new sites would be the gravest, thus least likely option.

The prospects for nuclear reductions in Europe are bleak. In the current and foreseeable future, Russia is most likely unwilling to reduce its own stockpile of NSNW on a reciprocal basis proposed by NATO in 2010, and the position of the proponents of unilateral NATO/U.S. nuclear reductions has been seriously undermined by the Russian show of military strength in Ukraine. The crisis may also influence the British discussion about the rationale for acquiring next-generation submarines armed with nuclear weapons. At the same time, it should be highlighted that nuclear weapons strengthen deterrence only in a situation in which the core interests of the relevant countries are at stake. Their value during localised crises is questionable, and in such circumstances, robust conventional capabilities play an essential role.