

ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



The Final Nuclear Security Summit: Some Implications for South Asia

While US President Barack Obama's final Nuclear Security Summit has not broken any new ground, the absence of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif helped turn the spotlight on the dangers of deploying tactical nuclear weapons, a move that Islamabad is keen on.

Shahid Javed Burki¹

More than 50 world leaders came to Washington to attend the Nuclear Security Summit, an initiative of the United States President Barack Obama, which was launched in 2010. Since then, four summits have been held; the one that concluded on 1 April 2016 might be the last. It is unlikely that another summit will be held after Mr Obama vacates his office in January 2017.

This time, some of the leaders who would have made a difference to the summit stayed away. Russia's President Vladimir Putin boycotted the gathering to protest the regime of sanctions

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at sjburki@gmail.com. The author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

under which his country was living after its meddling in Ukraine. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif did not attend after Lahore, his country's second largest city, was hit by a suicide bomber who killed 80 people. Mr Sharif was probably relieved that he was able to find an excuse to stay away since he would have come under a great deal of pressure from the Obama White House not to equip his military with tactical nuclear weapons that were hard to protect. The investigations carried out after the suicide attacks in Brussels had revealed that the terrorists associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria were working on stealing nuclear material. Experts in the United States believe that the tactical nuclear weapons that Pakistan intends to place in the hands of local military commanders would be hard to protect.

Mr Sharif's absence from the summit meant that pressure could not be exerted on him, at the most senior political level, to desist from commissioning tactical nuclear weapons. The decisions concerning the size and nature of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal are taken by that country's military, not by the civilian political leadership. In the conversations I had with senior serving and retired military officers during my recent stay in Pakistan, it was made clear that Washington would not be able to deflect Pakistan from deploying tactical nuclear weapons in order to offset India's rapidly growing conventional political might.

But Pakistan is not the only country rethinking its nuclear strategy. So are the United States, Russia and China. When Mr Obama signed the 2010 New Start Treaty that significantly reduced the number of nuclear warheads that the US and Russia could stockpile, he reached a separate side-agreement with the US Senate: the treaty would only be ratified if the administration began work on modernising the country's nuclear arsenal. As a result, the Pentagon started work to upgrade each part of the nuclear triad, including a new long-range bomber, new submarines and new missiles. The Pentagon launched a long-term programme to achieve these objectives: it could cost US\$ 1 trillion over the next three decades. "Two pieces of the modernization plans have attracted particular attention – the projects to develop a new nuclear cruise missile, known as the long-range stand-off missile (LRSO) and to upgrade the B61 nuclear warhead". This programme is in response to the Russian discussions about a strategy to "escalate in order to deescalate".²

² Geoff Dyer, "Nuclear upgrade raises arms race fears," *Financial Times*, April 1, 2016, p. 3.

Unexpectedly, the Obama administration had to deal with a crisis at the summit. This resulted from the on-going presidential campaign. Donald Trump the leading candidate for the Republican Party’s ticket, had suggested that Japan and South Korea should develop nuclear weapons to protect themselves from the growing threat from North Korea. This drew a sharp response from the administration. “The entire premise of the American foreign policy as it relates to nuclear weapons for the last 70 years is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons to additional states”, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes told the press. “That’s the position taken by everybody who has occupied the Oval Office. It would be catastrophic were the United States to shift its position and indicate that we support somehow the proliferation of nuclear weapons to additional countries”. Mr Obama, in his comments following the conclusion of the summit, adopted an even sharper tone and language. He described the US alliance with Japan and South Korea as “one of the cornerstones of our presence in the Asia-Pacific region – one that was paid for with the sacrifices of American soldiers during World War II, one that has expanded American influence and commerce and one that has underwritten the peace and prosperity of that region. You don’t mess around with that”.

Table: Global nuclear arsenal

Country	Deployed warheads	Stockpiled warheads	Total warheads
United States	2080	5180	7260
Russia	1780	5720	7500
France	290	10	300
United Kingdom	150	65	215
China	0	260	260
India	0	110	110
Pakistan	0	120	120
Israel	0	80	80
North Korea			6-8

In spite of some reduction in nuclear stockpiles, a new threat has emerged: the rapid build-up by China of its nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. Until about 2008, “the US believed China had

a maximum of 20 nuclear missile warheads. Now with the advent of a redesigned DF-5 and the new DF-41 (long range missiles) both capable of carrying multiple warheads”,³ the number in stockpile could increase to much beyond the estimate in the SIPRI Yearbook for the year 2015, the source of the Table above.

The Washington summit generated a list of announcements, including the reduction of stockpiles of highly enriched uranium (HEC) in a variety of countries, including Poland and Kazakhstan. There was also an agreement to remove separated plutonium from Japan. However, it was known that Tokyo was moving ahead on a new plutonium reprocessing plant that could produce up to eight tons of plutonium each year.

The summiters agreed that three different threats needed to be addressed. The first was terrorists acquiring or making exploding nuclear devices; the second, the possibility of sabotaging an existing nuclear device by penetrating the facility; and the third using radioactive materials available for medical purposes at clinics and hospitals. According to several experts, it was the last threat that presented a real challenge for governments around the world. It was the threat posed by terrorists that prompted President Obama to include a discussion of the ISIS in the summit’s agenda.

The Washington summit was not expected to result in an international treaty, and it didn’t. However, the question of continuing with the effort in some form was raised and debated. It was agreed that nations would continue to deliberate at least every two years on the side-lines of the meetings of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. These meetings will be held at the level of ministers; heads of state will not attend. With the Washington summit having concluded, the Obama nuclear security initiative passed into history.

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³ Charles Clover, “China’s new missile can hit any US target,” *Financial Times*, April 1, 2016, p. 3.