“Countering Nuclear Terrorism and the Trump Administration’s Agenda”

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Thanks for the kind introduction, Richard. It’s a great pleasure to be back at Hudson Institute – where I spent several very enjoyable years thinking and writing about nonproliferation, arms control, nuclear security, disarmament, nuclear posture, and Sino-American relations – and I’m pleased to see the faces of some old friends and colleagues in the audience today.

The topic for us here today is nuclear security, so as the fellow in charge of the Weapons of Mass Destruction and Counterproliferation Directorate at the National Security Council, let me begin by congratulating you – and Hudson – on the MacArthur Foundation grant that you have received to do work on preventing terrorists from obtaining nuclear weapons, materials, or technologies. The importance of that topic pretty much explains itself, of course, and I’m delighted to see additional work being done in the field. It’s also great to hear that part of the focus of the grant is to prepare the next generation of nuclear security experts, for it is upon them that our society will depend in the years ahead, to ensure that no such catastrophe ever occurs – not just “not on our watch,” but never. As my old Navy comrades in-arms might say, therefore, “Bravo Zulu!”

As I hope these warm congratulations will help signal, nuclear security is a very high priority for the new administration. Within the National Security Council staff, in fact, it is a very high priority for my directorate – indeed, it is one of our core missions. Fortunately, it is also one for which there exists strong and enduring bipartisan support in the U.S. policy community. In different administrations, this support can take slightly different forms over time, but over the years, it has been gratifying to see support for nuclear and radiological security remain strong.

My directorate deals with a number of issues that have pretty strong political valences, and on which the two U.S. political parties sometimes take oppositional positions that can make policymaking rather contentious. Arms control and disarmament, for example, are among these sometimes fraught policy arenas, as is U.S. policy on North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation. Another politically challenging one, especially of late, relates to Iran and the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Tehran. It is such live-wire political issues about which you tend to see a steady drumbeat of stories in the newspapers,
about which panelists tend to raise their voices at each other in think tank fora. And it is in such areas that U.S. policy can sometimes seesaw back and forth over time, as administrations change.

Fortunately, however, nuclear security – and the absolute imperative of preventing terrorists from acquiring and using nuclear weaponry – is not one of those charged issues. To the contrary, it has been and remains transcendentally obvious to policymakers, across the political spectrum, how important this task is. I can assure you that it remains critically important to us, in the current administration, to prevent and disrupt WMD terrorism efforts, enhance nuclear security, prevent chemical weapons use, and prevent proliferation.

Not a lot of the senior people in our new team came into office with much experience on these issues, but they’ve caught on quickly. Unfortunately, they’ve had to. Chemical weapons use is already now routine in the Middle East, including by non-state actors. Daesh, for instance – the terrorists of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – have regularly used chemical agents such as sulphur mustard against their opponents on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, and are clearly eager to acquire any new capabilities they can. Despite the Russian choreographed charade of the Assad regime in Syria pretending to relinquish its chemical weapons stockpile in 2013-14, moreover, it has now long since become clear that Syria retained a significant chemical weapons capacity – a capacity that it has subsequently used to horrific effect, such as with the nerve agent attack upon Khan Shaykun on April 4. The regime has also continued chlorine gas attacks.

Tragically, the Middle East is no stranger to chemical weapons usage, with a long history of such problems that has included Egyptian use during the civil war in Yemen in the 1960s, Syrian use against the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama in 1982, an orgy of chemical killing during the Iran-Iraq War in the late 1980s, and Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons against restive Kurds in 1988. One might have hoped that such periodic use would disappear with the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1997, but that has not occurred, and the Middle East remains afflicted.

With there today no longer being even much pretense of a norm against chemical weapons use in the Middle East – and with ISIS actively looking for ever-more potent tools to use in its attacks, as we work with our allies and partners to stamp out the territorial existence of their blasphemously presumptuous “caliphate” – it is more important than ever to prevent such murderous enthusiasms from being able to have recourse to nuclear weapons.

We have to remain flexible and vigilant and use all tools at our disposal to prevent the acquisition, proliferation, or use of WMD by any actor, for we know that there are both state and non-state actors that seek to develop, acquire, or improve their WMD capabilities. Some may want such weapons for deterrence, while others may want to use them – or believe that use
would be advantageous in some scenarios. This administration is determined to prevent or deter
WMD use of any kind, and is well aware that WMD use by any actor lowers the threshold for
others who may seek to follow suit.

This administration came to focus especially acutely upon these problems last spring with
the Syrian atrocity at Khan Shaykun, which so moved and appalled the President that he
immediately chose to lay down a potent marker against such acts by unleasing an attack with 59
Tomahawk missiles upon the Syrian airbase from which the nerve agent assault had been
mounted. To make clear that his attention has not flagged, and that he fully realizes the dangers
presented by terrorist interest in increasingly powerful WMD tools, the President also declared in
August that “[w]e must prevent nuclear weapons and materials from coming into the hands of
terrorists and being used against us, or anywhere in the world.”

Accordingly, we are proud to be the latest administration to commit ourselves to keeping
weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of terrorists. The challenge now is to turn our
commitment – and the expressed commitment of many other international partners – into
concrete actions. As part of the Nuclear Security Summit process during the previous
administration, the United States and our partners made many such commitments, some of which
have now been codified in IAEA Information Circulars (“INFCIRCs”). We must keep up this
momentum, and transition the high-profile process of Summit-based promise-making into real-
world implementation and tangible progress.

The international community faces real challenges in keeping nuclear weapons, materials,
and technology out of the hands of non-state actors as a result of certain modern trends. We are
seeing, for instance, an expansion of nuclear weapons and materials in South Asia, which could
create additional complexities in maintaining control over them. Additionally, Russia’s
withdrawal from almost all aspects of bilateral cooperation on securing nuclear material could
result in a reduction in security at certain facilities in Russia’s vast and expansive nuclear
complex. Moscow will need to commit significant financial and human resources to maintain
adequate security within its nuclear infrastructure, but this is not always an issue Russia has
prioritized. With the Russians today hard at work building new nuclear weapons and new
delivery systems – as well as new types of weapon and delivery system – and once more
expanding their infrastructure, these challenges may become still more acute in the years ahead.

Another worrying trend is the increasing availability of technology and information on
how to produce, manufacture, assemble, and use weapons of mass destruction. Modern
information technology enables state actors and terrorists alike to access useful information,
while the rapid advancement of biotechnology – particularly that associated with genome editing
and synthesis technologies – creates new risks of malign use or devastating accident from
technologies that are increasingly available worldwide.
Whether with respect to nuclear power and radiological medicine, the many fruits of the chemical industry, or the miracles of modern biology, some of the technologies that help make modern life as rich and wonderful as it is also have a Janus-faced aspect. It is our challenge to build habits, rules, and institutions that prevent their being leveraged for destructive purposes while still taking advantage of their enormous potential for good.

In that respect, there remains much work to do. Although participation by the international community in efforts to curb proliferation has expanded, for example, rigorous enforcement of relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions and robust application of control regimes remains an ongoing challenge. Many countries still lack adequate domestic laws and bureaucratic capacity to do this work properly, while some countries willfully look the other way when proliferation-facilitating transactions occur. We do have some sound international rules, institutions, partnerships, and capabilities, but successfully stemming the proliferation of sensitive technologies requires constant vigilance, active honing of these mechanisms, a degree of capacity-building assistance, not to mention political-level follow-through once commitments have been undertaken. It requires other countries not only to take action, but also to routinize such behavior. They need, one might say, to make right action into a habit.

That’s the “supply side.” But there’s also a “demand side” – and this is part of why it is so important to take resolute steps to hold entities accountable for WMD use, and to deter or dissuade future use. Every time chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons are used or are perceived to have given their users tactical or strategic benefit, it becomes that much harder to control proliferation and use in the future. This is where our own preparedness and response capacities become particularly important, not just for the benefit they can provide in mitigating the damage should we fail to prevent terrorist WMD use, but also for the role they can play in deterring use in the first place, because such attacks will be attractive to terrorists only in proportion to their ability to cause catastrophic harm. Preparedness, therefore, does not merely save lives in the event of attack; it helps deter such attacks.

Bearing all of this in mind, we recently completed an assessment of our approaches to nuclear security, in order to ensure they address these challenges. We are not yet in a position to roll out this strategy publicly, but we are pleased with the results, and I am confident you will be pleased to hear that nuclear security is still is a high priority.

In keeping with the President’s “America First” approach to foreign policy, we are committed to protecting our homeland and the welfare and interests of our citizens both at home and abroad. But this is no crude isolationism, for we recognize that terrorist threats exist in global networks, and that sensitive nuclear or radiological material acquired anywhere could be used against U.S. interests either at home or abroad. This makes the security of such materials
worldwide key to the prevention of WMD terrorism. In order to prevent their acquisition by terrorists, we are working domestically, bilaterally, and multilaterally with our foreign partners – and with industry and the private sector – to eliminate or minimize the nuclear and radiological materials that are of greatest concern, to locate and re-secure material already outside of state control, and to improve the security of those materials that we cannot simply eliminate.

Partnerships are critical to our success in this, and to sustaining our strategy over the longer term, because fundamentally, the responsibility for the security of sensitive materials lies with the states that own them. We must build a shared vision of the threat of nuclear and radiological terrorism, help build capacity in the countries that retain these materials, and work with other states and international organizations to spread a culture of security that continues to adapt as technologies and threats change. We will also partner with industry and the private sector – including universities and non-governmental organizations – to develop innovative solutions that will supplement and enhance global nuclear and radiological security efforts.

But it’s not just about “them;” it’s also about “us.” Even here in the United States, we must eliminate excess nuclear and radioactive material and shrink the domestic inventories of such materials that exist, make certain that what remains is adequately secured, and ensure that detection and response capabilities effectively leverage all available tools and talents.

So while discussion of the details of our new nuclear security strategy must await another day, let me assure you that the end of the Nuclear Security Summit process signifies no lessening of attention and priority. Instead, it signifies our focus upon transitioning the global nuclear and radiological security effort into what we hope it will remain over the long term: an axiomatically important, enduring priority for the policy community, the key tasks of which have become regularized, routinized, and systematized – no longer something novel or unusual, but rather part of the bread-and-butter work and persistent day-to-day attention of international, state-level, and private-sector and civil society actors of all sorts. We need sharp and sustained attention to these issues to become part of the international community’s “new normal.”

In doing all this, as I indicated, partnerships with the broader policy community, including civil society organizations and think tanks, are an important ingredient for success. As we move forward, therefore – and as you here at Hudson embark upon your new program in nuclear security – I look forward to ensuring that our best experts have the chance to interact and work with you on these matters. And I look forward to seeing your efforts also bear fruit in helping produce tomorrow’s nuclear and radiological security experts, growing the talent we need to make progress in this critical endeavor in the years ahead.

Thanks again for having me.