

Assessing Progress on Nuclear Security Action Plans

Participants at the final Nuclear Security Summit in 2016 agreed on “action plans” for initiatives they would support by five international organizations and groups—the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations (UN), Interpol, the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Destruction, and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT). The institutions were supposed to play key roles in bolstering ongoing nuclear security cooperation after the summit process ended. The action plans were modest documents, largely endorsing activities already underway, and there have been mixed results in implementing them.

For example:

- Some IAEA member states who were not invited to the summits have not wanted the IAEA’s nuclear security programs to be driven by decisions from a summit process they had no voice in. As a result, in pursuing its nuclear security work, the IAEA has generally—apart from publishing information circulars—not referred to the summits or the action plan. Most of the IAEA action plan simply committed participating states to “advocate” for the IAEA “continuing” to do things it was already doing, and those have continued. But it also called for enhancing “the importance of nuclear security” at the IAEA, for “reliable and sufficient resources” for the IAEA’s nuclear security work, and for participants to “periodically” host IAEA nuclear security reviews, and there has been only limited progress in these areas since the 2016 summit. The IAEA’s 2016 nuclear security conference made clear that the IAEA could serve as a crucial forum for discussions among experts, but was a challenging place for making political decisions about next steps. Countries made no new major new nuclear security commitments; the ministerial declaration was weaker than the statement from the 2013 ministerial; and very few countries made meaningful announcements about further progress.
- The Global Partnership’s action plan mentioned, among other initiatives, helping countries with nuclear security culture; reducing insider threats; strengthening transport security; strengthening computer security; and working with the nuclear security Centers of Excellence. Global Partnership participants have taken only very modest steps in these directions since the nuclear security summits. While the G7 and the Global Partnership it launched continue to discuss nuclear security, they have not attempted to take on any substantial part of the role the summits played in discussing and deciding on next steps in nuclear security.
- The GICNT action plan, like its IAEA and UN equivalents, largely endorsed activities already planned. Most of the work in the plan was focused on GICNT’s three working group areas, and not on physical protection or control and accounting for nuclear weapons, weapons-usable nuclear material, or high-consequence nuclear facilities—though the plan did suggest convening expert meetings to discuss possible activities “in other technical subjects or on cross-disciplinary issues” covered by the GICNT principles, and called for helping states build capacity “across the spectrum of nuclear security challenges.” There is little indication that the action plan has led to significant new activities in actually providing security for nuclear weapons, materials, or facilities.
- The Interpol action plan primarily endorsed activities already underway or planned. While the action plan did pledge that participants would contribute additional resources to Interpol’s nuclear and radiological efforts, there is little indication this has happened.
- The action plan for the United Nations largely reaffirmed the limited UN activities already taking place. Where the Action Plan mentioned specific new initiatives, the record on follow-through is mixed.

This paper will review the key nuclear security activities of these five international organizations and groups since the 2016 summit, and in what areas the action plans can be said to have led to action. It will then assess the barriers that exist to achieving the goals of the action plans in these organizations. Finally, it will provide recommendations for how these five international institutions can make further progress in strengthening nuclear security around the world.

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