

Weapons of Mass Distraction: The Nuclear Summit and ISIS “Madmen” ... Preparing to Wage Nuclear War

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“When you can give AK-47s to a group of guys and they slaughter a group of people on the streets of Paris, why would you really care about something like transporting radiological material?” – *Andrei Baklitsky, Sputnik, Mar 31, 2016*

Nuclear summits are the great talk shops of international diplomacy, the brain child of President Barack Obama after his nuclear weapons free aspirations were voiced in Prague. They tend to be characterised by hyperbole and fantasy. Most importantly, they tend to make the nuclear club a matter of necessity while always advertising the point that some states can have options while others cannot.



Each of these summits tends to come with its assortment of terrors as well, real or imagined. The dirty bomb is always the demon star of the show, the hypothetical that has kept experts and tenured chatterers busy in astrological prediction for years. No such bomb has ever materialised, and the prospects of ever creating one are small.

As John Mueller observed in *Atomic Obsession* (2009), such radiological weapons, which are supposedly “the poor man’s nuclear weapon” of choice, are actually “incapable of inflicting much immediate damage at all.” Dispersal of such matter effectively would be nigh impossible to make them worthwhile. They constitute, not so much weapons of mass destruction as those of mass disruption.

The threat of an event of singular terror, used as policy motif, is a form of self-entitlement. States which are part of the nuclear club can then direct their resources to making sure that others do not acquire a nuclear option. Challengers can be contained, if not eliminated. This always enables the retention of nuclear weapons in some number.

An international system dedicated to controlling the trafficking and trade of radioactive or fissile material is constantly hyped for reasons of seriousness and worth. These are objects of mass distraction, but they form the subject of each nuclear summit.

Obama has played the same tune as his predecessors: worry about the unknown agent of insanity, the mad, blood lusting professor, the suicidal freak show keen to spread destruction. Never mind the normalised madness that characterises the very desire to have such weapons to begin with. The sanity of those in the club, in other words, is never questioned, let alone probed. It is merely assumed.

“The danger of a terrorist group obtaining and using a nuclear weapon is one of the great threats to global security,” he claimed in convening the meeting of world leaders in Washington on Friday.

The point for Obama is to give the impression that the world is somehow safer, if indeed it was ever more or less unsafe. (Such terms of reference are always irrelevant considerations; they cannot be measured or evaluated, only contemplated.) Since the first such summit was convened six years ago, the US president claimed that steps had been taken to reduce the likelihood of a nuclear terrorist attack through “concrete, tangible steps”.

Now the new terrorist boys on the block, who go by the various stylised versions of ISIS, ISIL and Islamic State, have captured the imagination of the nuclear doomsdayers. This, despite remaining essentially conventional in their methods of killing. “There is no doubt that if these madmen ever got their hands on a nuclear bomb or nuclear material,” warned Obama, “they most certainly would use it to kill as many innocent people as possible.”[1]

False comparisons are offered. If a terrorist group can use chemical weapons, then it is equivalent that they would be able to use nuclear weapons. Such oft made relativising positions are not useful at all, suggesting parity between groups that merely serves to cloud the issue.

Such a fear necessitates acts that would make sure that such material “doesn’t fall into the wrong hands in the first place,” which is another way of suggesting what the right hands are to begin with.

Not all in the nuclear country club wished to participate at these talks. Others were also excluded, demonstrating the tenuous link between the moral aspiration of securing nuclear material on the one hand, and the realities that afflict the global security environment. Having such weapons is ultimately ideological.

According to Andrei Baklitsky of the Moscow-based PRI Centre, the Russian absence was prompted by the exclusion of Moscow’s prominent allies. Being hosted by the United States, it became something of a selective round table. “With this arbitrary approach, there was always this feeling that maybe [the summit] should be hosted someplace where everybody could participate and engage.”[2]

The other terror of concern was North Korea, which constituted an odd point of discussion given the tenor of the talks. “The Nuclear Security Summit 2016,” goes the site’s description, “will continue to provide a forum for leaders to engage with each other and reinforce our commitment at the highest levels to securing nuclear materials.”[3]

As if anticipating this exact point, the regime in Pyongyang on Saturday tested what was said to be a new anti-aircraft weapons system. Leader Kim Jong-un similarly taunted those at the talks, specifically dismissing the US-Japan-South Korea summit as “nonsensical”.

Furthermore, the West's broad approach against the North Korean nuclear program was in violation of rights to "legitimate access to nuclear weapons." [4]

After such summits, and a bit of back slapping, the only genuine conclusion to reach is that states, rather than groups, remain the greatest threats to international security. The idea of the rational statesman is as much a fiction as the nuclear armed non-state agent keen on perpetrating an existential holocaust.

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Notes:

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/01/obama-nuclear-security-summit-stop-madmen-isis-terrorism>
2. <http://sputniknews.com/us/20160331/1037296385/loud-clear-putin-nuclear-summit.html>
3. <http://www.nss2016.org/>
4. <https://www.rt.com/news/338139-korea-rocket-missile-test/>

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