

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks With Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands at the Opening Plenary Session of the Nuclear Security Summit

April 1, 2016

President Obama. Good morning, everybody. It is my privilege to welcome you to Washington and to formally convene our fourth Nuclear Security Summit. I convened our first summit 6 years ago in this same room because the danger of a terrorist group obtaining and using a nuclear weapon is one of the greatest threats to global security.

Our nations committed ourselves to action: concrete, tangible steps to secure the world's vulnerable nuclear materials. And we continued our work at our summits in Seoul and The Hague. And I want to again thank our friends from the Republic of Korea and the Netherlands for their leadership on this critical issue.

Back at our first summit, I quoted Albert Einstein. At the dawn of the nuclear age, he said, "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything." And he added, "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive." Over the past 6 years, when it comes to nuclear security, we've embraced a new type of thinking and a new type of action. This is a perfect example of a 21st-century security challenge that no one nation can solve alone. It requires coalitions and sustained coordination across borders and institutions. And the good news is, we've made significant progress.

We've made nuclear security a priority at the highest levels. And I want to thank all my fellow leaders, from more than 50 nations and key international organizations, for your commitment to this work and being here today. Some of you were here for our very first summit; many of you have taken office and joined this work. But it's a reminder that the task of protecting our citizens transcends political ideologies, parties, and administrations.

To date, our nations have made some 260 specific commitments to improve nuclear security, and so far, three-quarters of these steps have been implemented. More than a dozen nations have removed all their highly enriched uranium and plutonium. Countries have removed or dispersed—disposed of several tons of this deadly material. Nations have improved their nuclear security, including stronger regulations and more physical security of nuclear facilities, and more nations are cooperating to prevent nuclear smuggling.

Leading up to this summit, nations have fulfilled additional commitments. Argentina, Switzerland, Uzbekistan all successfully eliminated all their highly enriched uranium from their countries. China recently opened its new center for promoting nuclear security and training, and I'm pleased that the United States and China are cooperating on nuclear security. And Japan is working to complete the removal of more than half a ton of highly enriched uranium and plutonium, which is the largest project in history to remove nuclear material from a country.

I'm also pleased to announce that in recent days, after many years of work, 102 nations have now ratified a key treaty, the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material. As a result, we expect that the treaty will enter into force in the coming weeks, giving us more tools that we need to work together in the event of theft of nuclear material or an attack on a nuclear facility. Several of the nations here made the extra effort in recent weeks to complete

this process in time for this summit, and I want to thank you very much for helping us get over the line.

Once again, I'm making it clear that the United States will continue to do our part. Today we're releasing a detailed description of the security measures our military takes to protect nuclear material so that other nations can improve their security and transparency as well.

For the first time in a decade, we're providing a public inventory of our stockpiles of highly enriched uranium, which could be used for nuclear weapons, and that inventory is one that we have reduced considerably. When it comes to our nuclear-powered ships and submarines, we're exploring ways to further reduce our holdings of highly enriched uranium.

In short, everybody has been participating, and by working together, our nations have made it harder for terrorists to get their hands on nuclear material. We have measurably reduced the risk. But as we discussed at last night's dinner, the threat of nuclear terrorism persists and continues to evolve. Fortunately, because of our coordinated efforts, no terrorist group has succeeded thus far in obtaining a nuclear weapon or a dirty bomb made of radioactive materials. But we know that Al Qaida has long sought nuclear materials. Individuals involved in the attacks in Paris and Brussels videotaped a senior manager who works at a Belgian nuclear facility. ISIL has already used chemical weapons, including mustard gas, in Syria and Iraq. There is no doubt that if these madmen ever got their hands on a nuclear bomb or nuclear material, they most certainly would use it to kill as many innocent people as possible.

And that's why our work here remains so critical. The single most effective defense against nuclear terrorism is fully securing this material so it doesn't fall into the wrong hands in the first place. This is difficult. At hundreds of military and civilian facilities around the world, there's still roughly 2,000 tons of nuclear materials, and not all of this is properly secured. And just the smallest amount of plutonium—about the size of an apple—could kill and injure hundreds of thousands of innocent people. It would be a humanitarian, political, economic, and environmental catastrophe with global ramifications for decades. It would change our world.

So we cannot be complacent. We have to build on our progress. We have to commit to better security at nuclear facilities, to removing or disposing of more dangerous material, to bringing more nations into treaties and partnerships that prevent proliferation and smuggling, and to make sure that we have the architecture in place to sustain our momentum in the years ahead.

And with so many members of the global coalition against ISIL here today, this will also be an opportunity to make sure that we're doing everything in our power to keep a terrorist group from ISIL—like ISIL from ever getting its hands not just on a nuclear weapon, but any weapon of mass destruction.

So I am very appreciative of the excellent work that's been done and the excellent conversation we had last night. With that, what I'd like to do is to invite Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands to review some of the specific progress that we've made since our last summit.

Mark.

Prime Minister Rutte. Mr. President, dear Barack, esteemed colleagues, and ladies and gentlemen: Barack, your initiative in 2010 to convene the first Nuclear Summit has bolstered our defenses against the nightmare of a nuclear attack.

The vicious terrorist acts in Brussels last week only underscore the importance of the NSS process. And it's fitting that we are completing this cycle of four summits under your leadership.

In 2014, it was my privilege to welcome the NSS to The Hague. And it's encouraging that we have continued to make progress since then. First, the amount of nuclear material in circulation continues to decline. More and more excess nuclear material is being stored and handled in a sustainable manner, like the recent shipment of excess plutonium and highly enriched uranium from Japan to the United States. And the use of low-enriched uranium for the production of medical isotopes and other purposes is on the rise.

Second, the material that is out there is being made more secure as more countries turn the IAEA recommendations into national legislation. Since The Hague summit, 37 have committed to doing so, most recently, Jordan and China.

And indeed, third, international cooperation and commitment continue to grow. And the imminent entry into force of the amended Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material is a great achievement. And this important milestone reinforces our efforts at this summit today.

I'm also delighted that earlier summits have provided a legacy in two other respects. Firstly, the scenario-based policy discussion we introduce in The Hague was valuable experience. Today we are using this tool again. And I look forward to an informal, concrete, interactive discussion, and I have no doubt it will be just as successful as in The Hague.

Secondly, there is the gift basket. It's great to see how initiatives launched by one or more countries can bring us closer to a breakthrough. In the past few months alone, new gift baskets have been added on complex issues like cybersecurity and insider threats. Let's keep up the momentum even after this final NSS.

Dear colleagues, this summit is not the end of our quest to make the world safe from nuclear terrorism. The five organizations to which we pass the torch today can count on our continued support and commitment. Should a need arise, I know that everybody here will be ready to return to our roundtable.

Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you very much, Mark, for the excellent summary.

With that, I'd like to ask the press to depart the room. And we will begin this opening plenary session.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:17 a.m. in Halls D and E of the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorist organization.

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