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Building a US-China nuclear partnership in Southeast Asia by Daniel Wertz

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The US has invested billions of dollars in nuclear security abroad to deter, detect, and interdict illicit trafficking of nuclear and other radioactive materials to reduce the probability of these materials being used against the United States or its allies and international partners. In the 1990s and early 2000s the focus of these efforts was on Russia and the former Soviet nations, but after the launch of the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) process the focus has shifted toward Asia.

China has the most ambitious nuclear energy program in the world, with 32 plants currently in operation and 22 reactors under construction, and is poised to become a major player in international markets for reactor technologies. Given its growing role, an effective partnership between Washington and Beijing will be crucial to the global nuclear security regime. Most importantly, China's willingness to invest in international capacity building and training in nuclear security and safety issues will be vital for becoming a responsible supplier of nuclear goods and services.

Although the US and China have been at odds over a host of nuclear issues – such as how to respond to North Korea's WMD programs and suspicion over the other's approach to the nuclear programs of Pakistan and India – they share a common interest in ensuring the security of nuclear facilities and preventing the smuggling of nuclear and radiological materials. Notably, China's leaders have attended all four of the Nuclear Security Summits. At the most recent summit, held in Washington this past April, China and the US issued a joint statement pledging to work together to reduce the threat of nuclear terrorism and strengthen the global nuclear security architecture. One important way to make this pledge a reality would be for them to partner to promote nuclear security in Southeast Asia, a region where nuclear energy may become increasingly important.

Southeast Asia currently has no nuclear power reactors online and, as a result of pledges from the NSS process, will soon be free of any highly enriched uranium (HEU). (Indonesia has pledged to eliminate its remaining stocks of HEU, used for medical isotope production, by September 2016.) Yet this region's dynamic growth and its reliance on coal, oil, and natural gas, make nuclear power an attractive option for Southeast Asian nations seeking to meet a growing energy demand while being mindful of their carbon footprint. Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia have all expressed interest in nuclear power. These four countries have proceeded at varying speeds to incorporate nuclear into their long-term energy planning and to create appropriate regulatory infrastructures. While public opinion, safety concerns, and financing difficulties might slow the arrival of nuclear energy to the region, the early inculcation of a culture of nuclear safety and security is critical to its eventual success.

The Nuclear Security Center of Excellence (COE) in Beijing, a cooperative project between the US and China that opened in March of this year, provides an important venue for tripartite cooperation with Southeast Asia. While the facility is primarily geared toward meeting China's domestic nuclear security training requirements, it can be an important forum for training specialists from across the region in best practices and advanced technologies related to securing nuclear facilities and preventing the smuggling of nuclear and radiological materials. The COE can help set a high standard for nuclear security training in East and Southeast Asia, and could help establish a norm of regional cooperation and collaboration.

Another avenue for cooperation is the establishment of a regional training mechanism for port security – training customs agents in China and Southeast Asia to detect illicit nuclear materials and to be able to identify WMD-related equipment and technology. Washington and Beijing have previously collaborated to improve China's capacity to detect nuclear trafficking, which has included the establishment of a radiation detection system at Shanghai's Yangshan Port – the world's busiest port – and the establishment of a Radiation Detection Training Center at China Customs' Qinhuangdao Training Center. The US and China also recently pledged to cooperate to establish a Chinese national course in commodity identification, which would improve customs agents' capacity to identify dual use goods. Expanding this bilateral cooperation to include Southeast Asia would help address the threat of nuclear smuggling throughout the region and expand capacity to implement UN Security Council resolutions that seek to address North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

Additionally, the US and China could cooperate – under the auspices of the IAEA and on an *ad hoc* basis – to strengthen regional bodies in Southeast Asia focused on nuclear energy cooperation. The two countries could provide technical assistance and support to ASEANTOM, the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy. The US and China could promote information-sharing and technical assistance through bodies such as ASEAN's Nuclear Energy Cooperation Sub-sector Network. Promoting a culture of nuclear security in Southeast Asia would be incomplete without parallel efforts aimed at building local engineering and technical capacity, supporting effective oversight bodies, and promoting best practices in nuclear safety and safeguards.

One key test for the sustainability of a US-China partnership for nuclear security in Southeast Asia is the extent

to which Beijing is willing to foot the bill: is China prepared to transition from being a recipient of nuclear security-related assistance and know-how to becoming a provider? China's financial contributions to global nuclear security thus far have been modest, such as a $1.15 million contribution to the IAEA Nuclear Security Fund and joint funding of the Beijing COE. Becoming a major donor in the area of nuclear security would present long-term benefits for China as well as for the region, helping the country establish a reputation as a responsible nuclear state and exporter as well as a key stakeholder in global nuclear governance.

A cooperative approach, with Washington and Beijing acting as partners and joint contributors, would help build a robust culture of nuclear security in Southeast Asia and beyond. With the NSS process having drawn to a close, this partnership could also help maintain momentum and international focus on the issue. Furthermore, a successful US-China partnership for nuclear security would help build the trust and confidence necessary for the two countries to tackle the thornier nuclear issues that divide them.

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