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Guest column: Controlling nuclear threat must be top priority

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This year will mark the first time international leaders will gather as a group for the express purpose of finding better ways to control dangerous nuclear materials. Such materials range from highly enriched uranium in nuclear power reactors and military stockpiles to radiological sources in your local hospital.

Presidents, prime ministers and senior officials from 44 nations and international organizations will meet in Washington April 12-13 to discuss and announce new international commitments in this critical area. While the nuclear security summit is a U.S. initiative, it is clear that significant progress in improving the world's ability to secure and control nuclear materials will require cooperation and coordination by many international actors.

President Barack Obama gave a major speech on nuclear issues in Prague last spring. Among key priorities, he said the United States sought a global effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear materials within four years. The upcoming summit is an important part of this process, especially given accounts that the global stockpile of nuclear materials may be large enough to build more than 120,000 nuclear bombs and that some of these materials continue to accumulate in unstable world regions.

While much needs to be done, the good news is the global effort to better control vulnerable nuclear materials can build on a solid foundation of recent practical experience. We often know what to do to improve protection and oversight. Sometimes the answers are as simple as building fences and installing surveillance cameras and sensors. U.S.-Russia cooperation in securing nuclear materials has worked surprisingly well since the 1990s, despite the fact that overall relations between the two nations have taken a considerable turn for the worse. We have a clear common interest in minimizing the nuclear terrorism threat.

Among other programs, the two countries set up regional nuclear training centers to offer assistance to facilities needing security upgrades. They worked with the G-8 group of leading nations to create the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. The scope of this effort to date has been mostly Russia, but expansion to other nations makes good sense. Separately, large amounts of nuclear materials from the former Soviet Union have been sent to the United States for use in reactors or storage. Kazakhstan and Ukraine repudiated nuclear weapons in this overall context. The idea of an international nuclear fuel bank is no longer a theoretical abstraction, but a subject of increasingly serious discussion.

Indeed, there is no shortage of excellent ideas. As always, the issue is political will and sustained attention to actually deal with the problem. The April summit can provide a general framework of core principles, catalog initiatives already under way, and point the way for needed follow-through by nations and international bodies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency. A related "unofficial summit" of nongovernmental nuclear specialists and groups, organized in part by the Stanley Foundation, will support the work of the leaders' summit and emphasize the importance of periodic benchmarks and implementation follow-up. Both summits can stress that sensible progress is possible despite differing political agendas and mutual suspicions. The U.S.-Russia experience is illustrative in this regard.

This year is also important in terms of the broader nuclear arms control agenda. Apart from a probable new U.S.-Russia arms agreement, the United Nations will host the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference this May. Britain has already indicated a strong interest in including improved

nuclear materials security as a major theme in those negotiations. At the same time, we must deal with the challenges posed by nuclear programs in Iran, North Korea and elsewhere.

Improved worldwide nuclear materials controls are a central part of the complicated, yet essential, task to reduce the nuclear terrorism threat. Sustained international and domestic actions can lower the chances of an intentional or accidental nuclear catastrophe. Major progress in securing and controlling nuclear materials requires the positive cooperation of numerous countries, international organizations, and even nongovernmental groups. The April Global Nuclear Security Summit and related "unofficial summit" can move us several big steps down this critical path.
