

Challenges in national nuclear security need specific, viable solutions

The article by Pierce Corden and David Hafemeister (PHYSICS TODAY, April 2014, page 41) about nuclear proliferation and testing was interesting and useful. The authors appear to be overly optimistic, though, about the role of tags, seals, and radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags in verification. I have studied hundreds of tags and seals, including those used for nuclear applications, and I have seen no evidence that current tags and seals are useful beyond “security theater”—fake security for show. They cannot stand up to spoofing by resourceful hobbyists, much less by a nuclear state with substantial technical expertise and resources. Counterfeiting and tamper detection are largely unsolved problems, with remarkably little significant, innovative R&D under way.

Inexpensive kits available on the internet can help a person sniff, spoof, and counterfeit RFIDs, and RFID readers are typically easy to spoof remotely or by physically accessing them for a few seconds. Encryption doesn't really address the problems with RFIDs, given the ease of counterfeiting, tampering, and transferring them from one object or container to another.

The International Atomic Energy Agency does no meaningful background checks on its employees and nuclear inspectors. That lapse increases the risk that insider attackers might defeat even effectively designed tags, seals, RFIDs, and surveillance hardware.

The field of nuclear safeguards and treaty monitoring has long been plagued by wishful thinking and deployment of hardware and software that lack adequate security. The article by Corden and Hafemeister is not helpful in addressing the problem.

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■ **The interesting article** by Pierce Corden and David Hafemeister misses a crucial issue in the discussion of nuclear nonproliferation treaties and their implementation.

President Dwight Eisenhower, in his famous 1953 “Atoms for Peace” speech and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that followed and codified

it, did not directly address what the world should do about countries that do not sign the NPT, have withdrawn from it, or violate its mandates. The situation has gotten complicated largely because the US and the Soviet Union and its descendant states—the Russian Federation in particular—have failed to squarely address the matter.

Starting in August 1945, I and others who realized that the world now knew how to destroy itself assumed that assistance on peaceful nuclear issues and even financial help for nonnuclear power sources would be withheld from nations that did not sign onto or violated the NPT.

Neither the Soviet Union nor the US took action against nonsignatories India, Israel, and Pakistan, nor against North Korea, which former president Jimmy Carter encouraged not to withdraw from the NPT but which has violated it. That failure continues in our approach to Hassan Rouhani, president of Iran.

As a signatory of the NPT, Iran has no right to make nuclear weapons, but it does have a right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. If Iran withdraws from the NPT (after the required six months' notice), it will have as much right as any country to make nuclear weapons (rights that we would prefer they did not exercise)—even more than the US or Russia, nations that would still be bound by the NPT with an agreement to disarm. Rouhani basically asked the US to agree to those rights, after which Iran would be sensible and enrich uranium only for peaceful applications. By refusing to recognize the logic described above, we encourage countries to stay in the NPT, even when they ignore its dictates, instead of persuading them to be sensible.

The authority of the NPT is further complicated by the refusal of US politicians, and hence the public, to realize that disarmament in exact synchronism with the adversary is not necessary. Actually, the “side” that disarms first saves money by not having to maintain its extensive stockpile.

Physicists have the training to understand those issues. In fact, for many years the world blamed physicists for bringing them the atomic bomb and trusted physicists to know what they had wrought. Physicists still have an

obligation and a duty to understand and explain those matters and not be content with a mere statement of the treaties. Their involvement should include helping colleagues in other countries explain to their government and people the importance of these issues. The future of civilization may well depend on us. Let us not fail the world again.

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■ **Corden and Hafemeister reply:** We are grateful to Roger Johnston and Richard Wilson for their comments. The applications of science and technology to nuclear nonproliferation and arms control are many; our article addressed only some of them. Tags and seals cannot stand alone in a verification system. We acknowledge that considerable care needs to be taken to deal with attempts to spoof them, whether from outside or by an “insider.” We endorse Johnston's observation that further R&D is important. Johnston pointed out in 2001 that the integrity of tags and seals can be strengthened with technologies that include thin films, advanced polymers, liquid crystals, microparticles, electro-optic materials, nanotechnology, one-time key pads, and other approaches.¹

Multiple signatures make tags and seals more robust. Clearly, some tags and seals that are more complex may be difficult for all International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) member states to accept. The US alone cannot dictate higher standards to the world, but it can work within the IAEA to upgrade safeguard technologies.

The concluding paragraph of our article briefly addresses the issues raised by Wilson on the lack of universality of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), specifically with India and Pakistan and US foreign policies that have made reversing their nuclear programs more difficult. But it is not accurate to say that either state has not been subject to efforts to halt them over the years; for example, their economies were severely sanctioned by the US after their May 1998 nuclear tests.

The NPT is not a suicide pact. It speaks of the right to peaceful uses of