

Governing the Atom Brief No. 5

The International Conference on Nuclear Security (ICONS): An Explainer

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The International Conference on Nuclear Security (ICONS) is a series of conferences organised every three to four years since 2013 by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) at its headquarters in Vienna, Austria. It provides a global forum for the discussion of nuclear security, involving IAEA Member States from all regions of the world, and includes representatives from

the ministerial to the technical level, as well as international and non-governmental organisations. This brief details the role and value of ICONS for the international nuclear security community, which topics and audiences are addressed by ICONS Conferences, its history, and its format and organisation.

Why is ICONS valuable to the nuclear security community?

ICONS is the largest and most inclusive, regularly convened international conference of nuclear security experts.

As such, it provides an opportunity for States to highlight their most recent accomplishments in nuclear security, for example, in their national statements during the plenary session, during which a number of ministers of IAEA Member States are in attendance.

National statements highlight States' priorities and concerns with respect to

nuclear security and may highlight issues reflected in the ministerial declaration (see below) or include announcements such as new and increased contributions to the IAEA's Nuclear Security Fund or announcements of upcoming or recently completed commitments.

In addition, the many technical sessions and side events at ICONS provide a unique opportunity for experts in the field from countries around the world to build new connections with colleagues.



Women in Nuclear side event at ICONS 2020. Credit: Dean Calma/IAEA

What topics does ICONS cover, who is the audience, and what is a typical agenda?

ICONS Conferences are intended to cover the full spectrum of nuclear and radiological security activities and topics. Nuclear security, as defined by the IAEA Nuclear Security Fundamentals (NSS No. 20), “focuses on the prevention of, detection of, and response to, criminal or intentional unauthorized acts involving or directed at nuclear material, other radioactive material, associated facilities, or associated activities.”

In any given year, ICONS may concentrate on one set of topics under the umbrella of nuclear security, but ICONS Conferences are generally not limited to a single, technical topic, in contrast to other IAEA conferences convened on nuclear security. In recent years, areas of focus included the legal and regulatory framework, building the next generation of nuclear security professionals, nuclear security culture, gender equality, and workforce development.

Different aspects of ICONS are aimed at various levels and areas of nuclear security professionals. Of particular interest to ministers and high-level officials is the ministerial segment, held in plenary in the first few days of the Conference and primarily focused on national statements and the adoption of the ministerial declaration.

In the remainder of the Conference, many parallel sessions are held on a range of topics relevant to nuclear security. These sessions include both high-level sessions and technical sessions.

The high-level sessions are focused primarily on key policy issues in nuclear security and feature invited speakers. The technical sessions, in contrast, feature briefings based on submitted papers, addressing topics ranging from broad policy issues such as national strategies for information security to highly technical issues such as evaluation and assessment of physical protection systems.

In addition, as with most IAEA conferences, side events on various nuclear security topics are organised alongside the main programme. ICONS Conferences have also explicitly engaged students and young professionals via essay competitions (in 2016 and 2020) and through the organisation of a "Delegation of the Future" initiative in 2024.

What is the role of the Co-Presidents of ICONS?

The Co-Presidents of each ICONS are responsible for leading the negotiations on the development of a ministerial declaration, which take place via meetings of an Open-Ended Working Group hosted by the IAEA. The Co-Presidents also chair the plenary session of the Conference and are responsible for a Co-Presidents’

summary of the Conference, highlighting the Conference's key outcomes.¹

What is the ICONS ministerial declaration?

For each ICONS, in the months before it is convened, a ministerial declaration is negotiated.² This ministerial declaration is a high-level statement of principles and conclusions regarding nuclear security agreed to by all ministers in attendance at the Conference. The negotiations are led by the Co-Presidents of the Conference in the months prior to ICONS and facilitated by the Secretariat. While the declaration is signed only by ministers in attendance at the Conference, the negotiations are open to all Member States to participate.

The ministerial declaration provides valuable input for the IAEA on its work and provides insights regarding key challenges for and recent successes in international nuclear security. It is used as a key input for the IAEA's development of the Nuclear Security Plan, a broad plan developed in consultation between the IAEA Secretariat and Member States every four years since 2002, to set out the IAEA's planned work in nuclear security over the coming four years.³

The ministerial declaration is typically a short document, around two pages.

Certain elements are common to each of the ministerial declarations, in particular:

- Reassertion that responsibility for nuclear security within a State rests entirely with that State
- A call that measures to strengthen nuclear security do not hamper international cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear activities
- Recognition of the central role of the IAEA in nuclear security
- Affirmation of the signatory States' commitment to contributing to the IAEA Nuclear Security Fund
- A call for universalisation of and adherence to key nuclear security instruments
- Appreciation for a range of IAEA assistance programmes for States in nuclear security

Further, the ministerial declarations typically include, near the end of the document, a call to the IAEA Secretariat and Member States to take this ministerial declaration into account in the consultation process between the Secretariat and the Member States during the development

¹ See the Co-Presidents' summaries for [ICONS 2016](#) and [ICONS 2020](#).

² See the ministerial declarations from [ICONS 2013](#), [ICONS 2016](#), and [ICONS 2020](#).

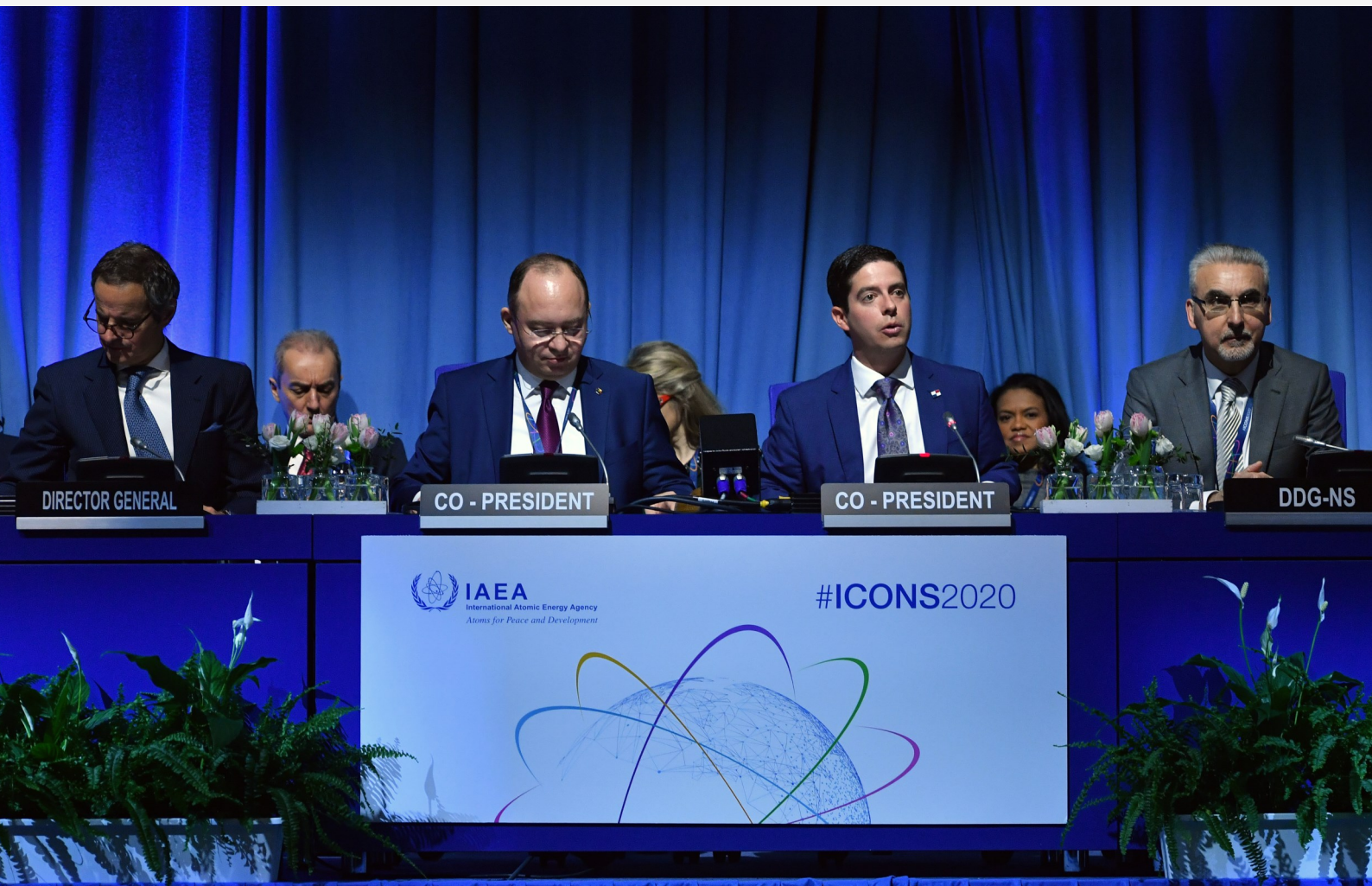
³ See further information on the [IAEA Nuclear Security Plan](#).

of the next Nuclear Security Plan, and a call for further Conferences to be convened every three to four years.

Many of these elements are also common with the yearly IAEA General Conference resolutions on nuclear security. The previous ICONS ministerial declaration is used as an initial input for the development of the next declaration and may serve as a basis from which edits and updates are negotiated.

Key issues that often arise in the negotiation of the ministerial declaration include the following:

- How to express the role of nuclear security with respect to peaceful uses of nuclear technology
- How to articulate the nuclear security benefits and challenges of emerging technologies
- How to address nuclear cyber security vulnerabilities
- Various issues specific to the previous four years



Opening remarks by the Co-Presidents at the ministerial segment of ICONS 2020. Credit: Dean Calma/IAEA



VCDNP event previewing ICONS 2020 at the Permanent Mission of Japan. Credit: Dean Calma/IAEA

In addition, past discussions have addressed the need to strike the right balance between repetition of language and themes from the IAEA General Conference resolution on nuclear security and the introduction of new language and ideas. This is not always straightforward, as the IAEA General Conference resolution is negotiated and agreed by consensus with all Member States, while the ministerial declaration is signed only by ministers in attendance at the related ICONS, which can lead to discussions about its relative status and how far it can and should diverge from the language used in the IAEA General Conference resolutions.⁴

However, the ministerial declarations are not static, and not strictly repetitive with the resolutions, although there remain many points of broad similarity.

Since 2013, the ministerial declarations have shortened by half, introduced new topics and, in some cases, strengthened existing ones beyond the IAEA General Conference resolution language.

For example, in 2020, the statement included the language “nuclear security measures may enhance public confidence in the peaceful use of nuclear applications.”

This is somewhat stronger than the related language in preambular paragraph (k) of the 2019 and 2020 IAEA General Conference resolutions on nuclear security, “[a]cknowledging that nuclear security may contribute to the positive perception, at a national level, of peaceful nuclear activities.”

⁴ The 2016 statement included a reference to the most recent nuclear security resolution, but this language was not carried over to the 2020 statement.

What is the history of ICONS?

The first ICONS was convened in July 2013. ICONS 2013 was the first nuclear security-focused conference at the IAEA to feature a ministerial component and included 34 ministers and 125 Member States. This initial ICONS was held between the second and third Nuclear Security Summit, a sequence of four international summits focused on nuclear security.

The Summits, spearheaded by the United States, were held in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 and involved more than 50 Heads of State, but did not involve all IAEA Member States.

In contrast, ICONS 2013 as well as subsequent ICONS, as an IAEA initiative, welcomed the participation of ministers from all IAEA Member States.

The ministerial declaration agreed at ICONS 2013 called on the IAEA “to consider organizing international conferences on nuclear security every three years.”⁵ The IAEA General Conference resolution on nuclear security in 2013 reinforced this agreement by requesting the Secretariat to report on the preparation of a follow-on Conference in 2016.⁶



Side event on the universalisation of the A/CPPNM at ICONS 2020. Credit: Dean Calma/IAEA

⁵ See the [2013 ICONS ministerial declaration](#).

⁶ See the [2013 IAEA General Conference resolution on nuclear security](#).

Since then, ICONS has been convened every three to four years. ICONS 2016: Commitments and Actions, was held in December 2016, and ICONS 2020: Sustaining and Continuing Efforts, was held in February 2020. These Conferences drew even broader participation, including at the ministerial level; 53 ministers attended ICONS 2020 out of 141 Member States in attendance. At the time of publication of this brief, the IAEA was completing preparations for the convening of ICONS 2024: Shaping the Future, planned for May 2024.

Member States have been supportive of ICONS and its regular conduct since its initiation. Notably, each year's IAEA General Conference resolution from 2013 to 2020 included a call for ICONS to be held every three years. Since 2020, Member States have called for ICONS to be held at four-year intervals, synchronising the convening of ICONS with the development of the IAEA's Nuclear Security Plan, noted above.

How is ICONS organised?

It falls on the IAEA Secretariat, and specifically the Division of Nuclear Security, to organise ICONS. The Secretariat is responsible for the organisational and technical aspects of the Conference and involves Member States in the organisation

via several Programme Committee meetings convened prior to the Conference. During the Programme Committee meetings, Member States are asked to weigh in on the programme and other matters related to the Conference.

ICONS is typically funded via extra-budgetary funds through the Nuclear Security Fund.⁷



Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

The VCDNP is an international non-governmental organisation that conducts research, facilitates dialogue, and builds capacity on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

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⁷ For more information on the Nuclear Security Fund, see [VCDNP Governing the Atom Brief No. 3 "Navigating the IAEA Budget Process"](#).