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Against All Odds: Preventing Terrorists from Getting Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons

THE CHALLENGE

A weapon of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of terrorists poses a grave threat to the security of the United States. While this is neither the most likely nor the only security challenge facing the nation today, its far-reaching implications make the prevention of proliferation a primary goal on the national security agenda of the US.

THE CONTEXT

Despite considerable fears to the contrary, apocalyptic forecasts during the Cold War era about the spread of WMD around the globe have been proven largely hollow. Beyond the five original nuclear powers, currently only four other states are thought to have an offensive nuclear capability. Many more are suspected of harboring offensive biological weapons programs. Despite this, no terrorist organization is known to possess a nuclear weapon or a viable offensive biological capability—despite incontrovertible evidence that these capabilities are being sought.

Historically, governments have been largely successful in preventing the dispersal of critical materials, technology and know-how to bad actors through technology denial agreements and efforts. Today, however, the forces of globalization – privatization, technological innovation, the ease of international communications and transport, free trade, the rise of catastrophic terrorist organizations, and the advent of a borderless “virtual world” – have collided with the end of the Cold War to challenge the viability of traditional nonproliferation policies. A new approach is needed.

WHERE TO START

Despite their front-line importance in preventing the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, materials, and expertise, US cooperative nonproliferation programs have not realized their full potential because of bureaucratic obstacles, a sustained lack of White House attention, and enduring vestiges of Cold War suspicion with Russia—the source of the lion’s share of potentially “loose” weapons, materials and knowledge. Getting the US agencies and budgetary resources aligned to more effectively achieve US priorities is crucial:

➤ **Spearhead a global reassessment of proliferation threats and program objectives with the intent to achieve specific priorities more quickly and cost effectively**

The president should appoint a single, high-level National Security Council official to coordinate a comprehensive interagency reassessment of global proliferation threats and government-wide program responses.

The original cooperative nonproliferation programs were conceived and launched in the early years following the unanticipated collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite radically different circumstances in Russia and the other former Soviet states today, and a dramatically different context for the programs as they are given a global mandate, a comprehensive reassessment has not been done of these programs' roles and objectives to ensure efficiency and effectiveness vis à vis other ongoing efforts in the current threat environment. Not only is there a need to reevaluate the original patchwork of nonproliferation programs to make sure they are still relevant, but the other major programs established at the Department of Homeland Security and elsewhere after September 11 to address the more diffuse scope of threats worldwide should be evaluated and prioritized as well.

➤ **Incorporate development assistance into the toolkit being applied for effective and sustainable implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1373 (counterterrorism) and 1540 (counterproliferation)**

The waning efficacy of existing approaches to nonproliferation requires a clear-eyed assessment of the global capacities necessary to ensure that states are not knowingly or unwittingly contributing to proliferation due to insufficient financial controls, inadequate border security, nonexistent or anachronistic export controls, and the like.

These elements of a comprehensive counterterrorism and counterproliferation strategy require leveraging potential synergies between our development and security assistance to achieve necessary minimal standards of technology governance worldwide, including the rule of law. Whereas proliferation has traditionally been addressed by access controls, safeguards, guards, guns, and gates, globalization necessitates a more nuanced and coherent approach to addressing the nexus of technology diffusion and catastrophic terrorism that appeals to the vested self-interests of all countries.

➤ **Recognize that sustainability of nonproliferation assistance efforts hinges on achieving "local ownership."**

The unwillingness of some states of the former Soviet Union to sustain US nonproliferation investments as their funding horizons sunset points to the challenges fomented by the failure to foster buy-in from host countries and underscores our heavy reliance on technological “quick fixes” to proliferation threats while ignoring pervasive cultural and governance challenges in the recipient states. Without nurturing local demand and building enduring trust within host countries, much of the past investment by the US may be squandered, dealing a potentially catastrophic blow to US nonproliferation objectives. The cooperative nonproliferation programs in Russia and around the world give the US government a unique means by which to use security assistance to meet mutually desirable objectives in countries of proliferation concern. Because WMD nonproliferation is not an immediate priority for most states, the agenda will only garner the necessary local ownership when the assistance is seen as contributing to the social and economic priorities of the host states. If leveraged appropriately, the programs could yield mutually beneficial cooperation on both nonproliferation and global development—but only if approached as a long-term investment in a shared future.

• **Better coordinate existing nonproliferation programs to achieve continuity and coherence**

The Departments of Defense, Energy and State all suffer under significant programmatic impediments resulting from unclear lines of authority among agencies or discontinuities in the overall interagency process. The lack of a focal point within the government to assess priorities, allocate budgets, and delegate authority across multiple government agencies hampers our ability to prevent terrorist acquisition of WMD. Congress has mandated a nonproliferation czar to provide strategic coordination, but this solution can only achieve the desired outcomes by fashioning a comprehensive strategy through the reassessment outlined above and by bolstering existing capacities to ensure continued coordination among agencies. A new tripartite structure involving the designated “czar” (or senior National Security Council official), Office of Management and Budget and the Department of State should be created to settle disputes, ensure budgetary prioritization and enhance information-sharing and coordination.

• **Work with Congress to clear unnecessary program restrictions and take appropriate action to provide nonproliferation program managers with the tools needed to succeed**

Over time, the US Congress has applied rigorous reporting requirements and fenced appropriations in order to ensure oversight of the nonproliferation programs. As new realities emerged, new requirements were added, but in many cases, outmoded requirements were not lifted, saddling program managers with an overly restrictive operating environment, unable to adjust to unforeseen circumstances. Remedies should include granting broad “notwithstanding authority,” streamlining the reporting processes, aligning newly defined priorities with appropriate budgetary allocations, and ensuring adequate personnel capacity within the three departments.

WHAT'S ON THE LINE

Since the end of the Cold War, no national security investment has been more cost effective or shown more tangible results than the suite of Cooperative Nonproliferation (CNP) initiatives encompassing the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programs at the Pentagon and the nonproliferation programs at the Departments of Energy and State—and now elsewhere in the Executive branch. Since 1995, more than 330 metric tons of highly enriched uranium—enough to fashion approximately 13,500 nuclear warheads—have been permanently transformed into fuel for use in civilian power plants across the United States. As of September 30, 2007, the US has secured 64 Russian nuclear warhead sites and 193 Russian buildings that contain nuclear weapons-usable material, while approximately 4,400 former Soviet WMD scientists, technicians, and engineers have found peaceful, non-weapons work in the private sector due to grants provided by the National Nuclear Security Administration.

Despite these notable successes, a survey of over fifteen years of CNP operation suggests that progress has been stymied by a series of practical, political and bureaucratic obstacles to effective implementation. But these problems can be resolved and our tools applied more effectively to reduce the likelihood that nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, materials and expertise will fall into terrorist hands. The next administration and Congress should invest the necessary political, capital and financial resources to ensure optimum performance to prevent a nuclear 911.



Brian Finlay

Prior to joining the Stimson Center in January 2005, Brian served as Director of the Threat Reduction Initiative, a Senior Researcher at the Brookings Institution, and a Program Officer at the Century Foundation. Before emigrating from Canada, he was a Project Manager for the Laboratory Center for Disease Control in Ottawa. He has also served as a consultant to Foreign Affairs Canada, where he worked on the Ottawa Treaty on Landmines and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. He holds an MA from the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, a Graduate Diploma from the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, and an Honors BA from the University of Western Ontario. He sits on the Board of Directors of iMMAP, a pioneering organization leading the way forward in the effective use of information management practices

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Dr. Elizabeth Turpen

Dr. Elizabeth Turpen brings Senate experience and a background in national security, nuclear weapons and nonproliferation issues to the Center. Dr. Turpen's previous employment was with Senator Pete V. Domenici (R-NM) as a legislative assistant responsible for defense, nonproliferation and foreign affairs. Prior to coming to Washington in 1998, she was a consultant on nonproliferation policy, US-Russia programs, and the national security implications of technological advances for a high tech company. Dr. Turpen has taught at Georgetown University, and has extensive teaching and lecturing experience. She holds a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a BA from the University of New Mexico.



For additional original research from the Cooperative Nonproliferation program, please read the following publications:

Nuclear Terrorism: US Policies to Reduce the Threat of Nuclear Terror (Partnership for a Secure America, 2008)

Old Plagues, New Threats: The Biotech Revolution and its Impact on National Security (Stimson Center, 2008)

Cooperative Nonproliferation: Getting Further, Faster (Stimson Center, 2007)

"25 Steps to Preventing Nuclear Terror: A Guide to Policymakers" (Stimson Center, 2007)