

Reducing the Global Nuclear Danger: International Cooperation – the Indispensable Security Imperative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The risk of a world-altering terrorist nuclear attack is growing. Keeping nuclear weapons out of terrorist hands should be the central organizing security principle of the 21st century, and international cooperation is the only realistic means of defeating that threat. Four steps are essential: reduce the global supply of nuclear weapons through arms reduction and non-proliferation initiatives; limit the spread of nuclear weapons technology; globally secure all nuclear weapons material to the highest possible standard; address the root causes of discontent underlying radical Islam.

The global security chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Powerful nations need the cooperation of poorer nations to safeguard global security. The U.S. must regain credibility as a nation that can act for common security and the common good, in order to obtain the international cooperation necessary to thwart nuclear proliferation and defeat terrorism. The United States should engage all nuclear weapons states in a joint enterprise to work toward a safer world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and toward the establishment of a more secure global political context that would make that goal possible.

We invented the United Nations for our collective security. We need to fund it and strengthen it to gain leverage in addressing the world's problems. International cooperation is critical to redressing the economic and political conditions that create a breeding ground for radical Islamic jihad. To develop common purpose with moderate Islamic states and Muslim leaders, we need to develop a sweeping plan, on the scale of the Marshall Plan, to address their most pressing economic and social needs.

The inescapable truth is that we must learn how to reduce grievances and defuse hatred before these emotions are expressed explosively and catastrophically.

REDUCING THE GLOBAL NUCLEAR DANGER: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION – THE INDISPENSABLE SECURITY IMPERATIVE

The greatest security threat today – not just for the United States, or for the West, but for the world – is the possibility that a terrorist group could acquire a nuclear weapon and set it off in a major city. The probability of such an event remains low – although it is growing. The consequences of such an event would be catastrophic and world altering.

Keeping such a weapon out of terrorist hands should be the central organizing security principle of the 21st century. It encompasses the key facts of global security today: a terrorist nuclear attack is the greatest threat, and international cooperation is the only realistic means of defeating that threat.

ADDRESSING THE THREAT

Leaders in the White House, the Congress and in the community of nations have repeatedly acknowledged the threat of a terrorist nuclear attack. They have used inspiring words and made solemn commitments to counter the danger. But our collective deeds have not matched our words – we need to re-invigorate our actions at home and abroad.

If a 10-kiloton nuclear device goes off in any major city anywhere in the world, it could kill hundreds of thousands in a single stroke. The loss of life would not be the only impact, however. The world economy would suffer a substantial blow – damaging the weakest economies the most. Today's levels of spending and global investment would plunge and might not recover for a generation, or more. The balance between security and liberty worldwide would move strongly against liberty. The effects would be far greater if there were not just one nuclear weapon, but the threat of a second or a third. This is a danger not just to life, but to our *way* of life.

There is more talk today about the threat of a terrorist nuclear attack because we are finally coming to accept that the probability is much higher than we had thought.

When Thomas Kean, the chairman of the U.S. 9/11 Commission¹, was asked if he thought there was a real possibility of a nuclear attack on an American city in his lifetime, the former New Jersey governor replied: “We talked to nobody who had studied this issue who didn’t think it was a real possibility.”

When you combine that “real possibility” with the destructive effects of a nuclear weapon, you have our greatest threat. With so much at stake, every one of us has reason to ask: “Are we doing all we can to prevent a nuclear attack?” The emphatic answer is “No, we are not.”

PLAYING DEFENSE

What must be done to address the global nuclear danger? Here are four priority steps:

- Reduce the worldwide supply of nuclear weapons by preventing the emergence of new weapons states and by taking concrete, verifiable actions to reduce the inventories of already-existing nuclear powers.
- Limit the spread of nuclear weapons technology by putting in place a system of reliable fuel assurances to support peaceful uses of nuclear power.
- Secure all nuclear weapons material such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium to the highest standards by promoting best practices and giving technical assistance to any and all states with nuclear capacity.
- Gain agreement on and implement a multi-state effort to address the root causes of the discontent underlying the virulent form of radical Islam that seeks these weapons for the purpose of inflicting mass death.

The U.S. and the international community – through a series of unilateral, bilateral and multilateral means – are doing some part of all of these things. Each step is recognized as important, but no step is seen as urgent. We have not acted and are not acting with the seriousness of purpose the threat demands.

¹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

So how might this sense of urgency and seriousness of purpose be fostered? In a word: leadership. In the past, great nations grew great and remained great without relying heavily on cooperation with other nations. They believed they could guarantee their own security.

That era, however – like it or not – is gone. The great leaders of our globally interconnected and interdependent age will be those who convince not only their own citizens, but all citizens, that if we are going to enjoy peace and prosperity in the 21st century, then all nations must cooperate in fighting and defeating the dangers that threaten us all.

That's a simple formula, but devilishly complicated in execution. Nuclear materials are distributed around the globe in many countries. Terrorists trying to acquire nuclear materials will not necessarily go where there is the most material; they will go where the material is most vulnerable. That means that the global-security chain is only as strong as its weakest link. It also means that – to a degree never seen before in history – rich and powerful nations will need the cooperation of small and poorer nations to safeguard their security. Our safety absolutely depends on it.

BUILDING BRIDGES

If the United States cannot defend itself on its own, then it must rouse the world to action, but there, precisely, is the rub. It will be hard for the United States to lead the world to action at a time when it has earned a reputation around the world for spurning international cooperation and for endlessly trumpeting the idea of “American exceptionalism.” The United States must work diligently to regain its credibility as a country that can act in the cause of common security and for the common good – if it is to have the authority to call the world to more urgent action in defense of nuclear terror.

To do this, the United States must abandon its policy of disdain for international treaty regimes and institutions, and work instead to strengthen them. Underlying this effort must be a restored U.S. commitment to work through the United Nations and the structure of international regimes for counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism, arms reduction and control, and the instruments for promoting global economic wellbeing that the United States helped create but has recently failed to adequately support. Where international organizations and regimes have been weakened by our lack of support or by their own internal flaws, these weaknesses must be eliminated, and both political and financial support restored. Working through international institutions is critical to restoring faith in the United States as a global partner. That restored faith will allow more effective leadership.

Central to gaining international cooperation from non-nuclear weapons states on nuclear proliferation matters would be a clear and unambiguous commitment by the U.S. and other weapons states to act purposefully to meet their responsibilities under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). This point was made in an opinion piece written in January in the *Wall Street Journal* by former U.S. Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn. In their essay, “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” they argue that we are on the precipice of a new and dangerous nuclear era, with more nuclear-armed states and a real risk of nuclear terrorism. In such a world, the four warn that continued reliance on nuclear deterrence for maintaining international security “is becoming increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective,” and that none of the nonproliferation steps being taken now “are adequate to the danger.”

The veteran statesmen argue that the United States and other nations must both embrace the vision of a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and pursue a balanced program of practical measures toward achieving that goal: “Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair or urgent. Without the actions, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible.” As former Secretary General Kofi Annan noted as he left office, the world risks becoming mired in a sterile stand-off between those who care most about disarmament and those who care most about proliferation. Continued paralysis is a danger to us all. On our current path, in Annan’s words, the “world is sleepwalking toward nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism.”

The United States has an opportunity to break this stalemate and re-establish its essential leadership in non-proliferation in a single, dramatic stroke. Selecting the forum of the United Nations annual meeting of the General Assembly attended by all world leaders, the United States should expressly and explicitly renew its NPT vows. The President should state the U.S. intention to engage all nuclear weapons states in a joint enterprise to work toward a safer world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and toward the establishment of a more secure global political context that would make that goal possible. The President should acknowledge that the requisite security context for achieving that goal does not exist today – and admit that we are headed in the wrong direction and must change course. The President could emphasize this commitment by announcing a number of steps that would reduce the nuclear danger and underscore America’s bona fides.

To this end, the President could announce his intent to:

- Achieve the arms reductions agreed to in the Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions by 2009 – three years in advance of the Treaty’s time schedule
- Abide by the low end of the Treaty permissible range of deployed weapons – i.e., 1,700 rather than 2,200
- Direct military officials to work with their Russian counterparts to change alert postures of U.S. and Russia strategic forces to enhance decision time and dramatically reduce the risk of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a ballistic missile
- Make clear that the Treaty of Moscow was not the end of arms control, and emphasize that it is America’s intention to engage the Russian Federation to achieve reductions below those set forth in the Moscow accord, aiming to conclude those discussions by 2009 and before the current Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty is due to expire.

The President should further state his intention to call for a corresponding commitment from non-nuclear weapons states to work urgently together on the four priority steps to counter nuclear terrorism described earlier. Lastly, the President should acknowledge that the issues of human security are powerfully linked to and affected by a long list of other pressing issues, including failed state governance, human rights abuses, religious fanaticism, race and gender discrimination, illiteracy, economic dislocation and environmental degradation. The President must reconnect the U.S. to its historic role of working to alleviate the broad array of ills that afflict civil societies throughout the globe. He should make clear his intention to return America’s image in the world to that of a “helping hand” and a “defender of the rule of law.”

The estrangement of the United States from international institutions has been more than a matter of atmospherics; it has taken on specific form in our failure to make up our arrears in U.N. dues or to adequately fund the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). As both an immediate sign of support for international institutions and a means of strengthening international nuclear security efforts, the U.S. should announce its intention to bring all UN accounts current and, specifically with respect to the IAEA, the President should declare America’s intention to equip that agency with the resources it needs to perform its critical mission, challenging other states to join us in overcoming the budgetary shortfalls of this critical agency.

DEALING WITH DEMAND

We must not confine our work on this critical issue to the “supply” side – that is, to the goal of securing and reducing supplies of nuclear weapons and weapons materials. We must also address the “demand” side, specifically, the quest by radical Islamic jihadists to obtain these weapons and use them in attacks designed to inflict mass casualties. Even if we succeed in making the case for cooperating against catastrophic terror, we will not get the cooperation we need from governments whose leaders fail to sustain support for cooperation from their own citizens.

The United States has a specific and compelling national security interest in identifying and helping redress the economic and political conditions that create a breeding ground for radical Islamic jihad. Depriving this movement of its sanctuary must include transforming the sanctuary into a healthier environment that will no longer support such terrorist elements. We can do this by earnest cooperation through international institutions and a commitment to address concerns of smaller, poorer states as we ask them to assist with mutual security priorities.

To develop common purpose with moderate Islamic states and Muslim leaders, we need to develop a sweeping plan, on the scale of the Marshall Plan, to address their most pressing economic and social needs. In a number of instances, this will involve giving them the financial assistance and reciprocal benefits to underscore our appreciation for and admiration of the values of progressive Islam. The resources for such a plan need not come entirely from the United States or the West. Portions of the Muslim world must contribute as well, both politically and financially. A critical part of any such effort will be to ensure that the large wealth transfers made from the West to the Middle East in the world oil trade are channeled toward improving the lives of its citizens and strengthening its civil society.

It is not necessary to prove that desperation breeds terrorism before attempting to justify addressing desperation as part of the effort to fight terrorism. One need only recognize the fact that countries are not going to join with us in fighting terrorism unless we support them in fighting misery. This is true not just of Muslim states, but of all states in danger of failure.

CONCLUSION

As the author Robert Wright has written – “the amount of discontent in the world is becoming a highly significant national security variable.” The effort to address the needs of people in the developing world and their discontent is tied directly to our effort to protect ourselves. The entire effort of non-proliferation is at its core an effort to buy time. As technology advances, weapons of mass destruction will become easier to make, not harder. Population growth in much of the world will aggravate the human security problems of today. The inescapable truth is that we must learn how to reduce grievances and defuse hatred before these emotions are expressed explosively and catastrophically.

To do that – as in the case of keeping weapons and nuclear materials out of terrorist hands – will require an unprecedented degree of international cooperation. It will require us to exploit every bilateral, multilateral and institutional relationship we have or can develop. But it will also require us to make more effective the principal means we as a community of nations have formed to provide for our mutual security.

We invented the United Nations so that we could provide for our collective security. We need to fund it, strengthen it, and make the most of the leverage it can give us in addressing every one of the world’s problems.

Archimedes – who gave us the mathematical understanding of leverage – once boasted: “Give me where to stand, and I will move the earth.” The leverage of international cooperation will do more than help us move the world; it will help us save the world – if we only learn how to use it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Before joining NTI, Mr. Curtis served as the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the United Nations Foundation (UNF) and was a partner in Hogan & Hartson, a Washington based law firm with domestic and international offices.

Mr. Curtis served as Under Secretary and, later, Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy from February 1994 to May 1997. He was Chief Operating Officer of the Department and, among other duties, had direct programmatic responsibility for all of the Department's energy, science, technology and national security programs.



Mr. Curtis is a lawyer with over 15 years' practice experience and more than 18 years in government service. He was a founding partner of the Washington law firm Van Ness Feldman. Mr. Curtis served as Chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission from 1977 to 1981 and has held positions on the staff of the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Treasury Department, and the Securities and Exchange Commission. He is a current member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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