

Recommendations for the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism

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Terrorist acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are exceptionally dangerous challenges to the security of the United States and indeed the entire world. A constant U.S. government priority should be to ensure that this possible threat never materializes.

Below I briefly offer several recommendations for improving the U.S. government's ability to conceptualize, organize for, and counter this threat. As the guidance I received asked me to focus on recommendations, I do not offer an overview of the problem or otherwise provide background information.

My remarks are divided into three sets, each of which addresses a different aspect of the problem: bureaucratic reforms; political steps; and foreign policy modifications.

Bureaucratic Reforms

Focus Government Efforts Primarily on Nuclear Weapons and Infectious Biological Agents. Current U.S. policy and the broader debate about terrorism is greatly confused by the misuse of the term “weapons of mass destruction” to include chemical and radiological weapons, as well as nuclear and infectious biological weapons. Most currently conceivable chemical and radiological attacks, while terrifying, would kill relatively few people: this is the history of chemical and radiological terrorism so far. Indeed, in all but a few cases the number who would die would probably be less than if the terrorists had used conventional explosives instead. To take this further, even many biological weapons—including several that have received tremendous media attention—are not truly “weapons of mass destruction.” These weapons, while also terrifying, are deadly to individuals and small groups, but again no more than conventional explosives.

Thus, in its programs to track and combat “WMD” terrorism, the United States needs to focus on nuclear weapons and infectious biological weapons in particular. Deaths from other types of chemical, biological, or radiological terrorism are horrible, but the overall

number is far fewer than those who could be at risk from true WMDs like nuclear weapons and this distinction in scale is vital to keep in mind. If we fail to recognize this distinction, we may “succeed” in stopping a low-casualty use of chemical weapons by terrorist groups but fail to devote adequate resources to preventing a group from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Ensure WMD Terrorism Is an Intelligence Priority. The U.S. government must maintain a constant awareness of the true state of the WMD terrorism threat. It is my sense that the number of current groups that seek WMD is low but that this short list includes al-Qa‘ida and several of its affiliates: the greatest current terrorism threat to the United States even excluding the WMD issue. Policymakers should be able to count on constant vigilance from the intelligence community in order to know which groups are seeking WMD and from where they might acquire them. In turn, the intelligence community should be able to draw on the resources and high-level policymaker support necessary for successful intelligence.

Of particular importance is learning more about groups *not* tied to al-Qa‘ida (which is already an intelligence priority and must remain at the top of the list) that might use WMD. Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese cult, was one of the few organizations to carry out WMD terrorism. The group conducted the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway that killed 12 people, and it sought to use unconventional weapons to kill tens of thousands or more. (For example, Aum reportedly also sought to acquire and weaponize the deadly ebola virus.) From a U.S. perspective, what is most worrying about Aum is that it was not known and followed by the U.S. intelligence community even though its ambitions and network went well beyond Japan. Other cults around the world might have aspirations for mass killing and, like Aum, considerable capacity for action but may not be known by U.S. intelligence.

Because the United States appropriately relies on foreign liaison services for much of its intelligence, Washington must be sure that its intelligence partners are focused on WMD issues: we cannot do this job alone. This involves convincing foreign services to make tracking WMD terrorism issues a priority, helping them gain the capability to do so, and ensuring that they are sharing all the information they already have and acquire in the future.

Track Pathogen Research around the World. Nuclear programs and nuclear research have long been an intelligence priority. Similar knowledge, however, is lacking about the biological research community. Pathogen research is far more decentralized, and government monitoring less developed. For the most dangerous pathogens, the U.S. government should have a strong awareness of the state of current research and where research is being conducted.

Foster Strategic Consciousness among Biologists. In the United States and in most Western countries, the members of the nuclear research community have largely acted as “good citizens” and recognized the dangers, as well as the importance, of their research for national security. The biological research community, however, is not accustomed to

seeing itself as part of a broader national security community and is wary (often appropriately so) of unnecessary government intrusion. The U.S. government should work with its own scientific bodies, international scientific organizations, and leading scientists around the world to try to foster a culture of accountability to ensure that biologists are aware of the potential misuse of their research. If this is not done carefully and sensitively, however, it will only foster mistrust of or disdain for the U.S. government.

Political Steps

Manage the Psychological Impact. The use of any chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapon would have a tremendous psychological impact on the American people. The 2001 anthrax attacks killed five Americans, but the damage went far beyond these tragic deaths. Mail stopped and panic grew, as many people feared that they too would be infected. Even a modest use of chemical weapons or a radiological attack would have a considerable psychological impact well beyond the immediate damage caused.

The U.S. government should try to diminish the psychological effects of these less deadly unconventional weapons. In particular, the U.S. government should have a communication plan in place to provide the American people with accurate and timely information about the danger. If this information is not provided, people will rely on rumor, conjecture, or the opinions of people who know little about unconventional weapons in general or the particular attack that has occurred. This confusion would magnify the overall level of panic. In addition, it would undermine confidence in government—one of the primary goals of terrorism. Currently, it is not clear who has responsibility for coordinating communication within the U.S. government and with state and local officials.

Managing the impact for a mass casualty event such as the terrorist use of a nuclear weapon would of course be exponentially harder, as the devastation would be overwhelming and the subsequent fear extreme. Daily life in much of the country, including in areas that might be in little danger of a follow-on attack, would be severely disrupted by fear and panic. Again, the U.S. government needs both control and transparency in the message it gives the American people or the overall impact would be far greater than the devastation already wrought.

Caution on an Immediate Response. After a CBRN terrorist attack, there would be a strong political temptation to act in a dramatic way. Such a step may be appropriate (if, for example, we have strong intelligence that makes the perpetrator clear and robust military options that would enable a decisive result), but at times patience might be the best response, particularly when the perpetrator is not clear. Because of the political pressure to respond, there should be a concerted bipartisan effort to support the executive branch if a delay is in order.

Foreign Policy Modifications

Perhaps the most important steps must be taken overseas.

Securing "Loose Nukes." The United States has programs such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program to manage the risk that states might not exercise control over their WMD materials and the know-how of their scientists. Although such programs can be expensive, on balance they are an extremely effective means of reducing the risk that terrorist groups might acquire nuclear weapons. Indeed, these programs should be expanded—not just continued.

WMD Threats in Pakistan. In my judgment Pakistan today is the most dangerous country in the world with regard to the problem of nuclear terrorism. Pakistan hosts much of the al-Qa'ida core, has an established nuclear program and is prone to political instability. Some parts of its military and intelligence services have also evinced sympathy for the jihadists. This problem may grow as a civilian government assumes control, particularly if its control over the country is weak and its relationship with the military troubled.

To manage the risks presented by the current situation in Pakistan, the United States should take several steps:

- Washington should ensure that control over the nuclear program remains at or near the top of any high-level policy discussions with Islamabad. The President himself should also make this clear to Pakistani leaders.
- The United States should work with both India and Pakistan to develop confidence building measures that will lower tensions between them. This in turn would reduce Pakistan's need to have a "launch on warning" doctrine or take other steps that might loosen central control over its nuclear weapons.
- Because Pakistan's military and intelligence services contain some *jihadist* sympathizers, the United States must have a strong intelligence penetration of Pakistan's security branches.
- There must be no successor to the A.Q. Khan network, which sold nuclear materials and know-how around the world. If a Pakistani government is again tolerating such activity despite U.S. pressure, the United States should not only suspend all aid but *should also consider actively seeking to remove the government from power*. I make this recommendation with an understanding of the immense difficulties and dangers that are inherent to this course of action.

Maintain a Strong Deterrent against State Sponsors of Terrorism regarding WMDs. With the exception of Pakistan, only Iran among the (potential) nuclear powers has strong links to terrorist groups. So far, Iran has worked with a wide array of groups and is particularly active in supporting militants in Iraq, aiding various Palestinian terrorist organizations

like Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and bolstering the Lebanese Hizballah—its closest terrorist group ally. In recent years, Hizballah has received hundreds of millions of dollars from Iran and a wide array of weapons, including anti-ship cruise missiles. It is noteworthy, however, that Iran has *not* transferred chemical weapons to Hizballah, despite having these systems in its inventory for over twenty years. This suggests that Iran recognizes a “red line” between the transfer of conventional and unconventional systems and thus would be particularly careful should it acquire a nuclear weapon. As Hizballah has not sought this capability despite its considerable indigenous capacity, it also suggests that the Lebanese group recognizes the U.S. “red line” as well.

Washington must be sure that Iran and other sponsors of terrorism continued to understand that any WMD, or even CBRN, transfer to terrorists would be regarded as a grave threat. U.S. diplomacy should encourage U.S. allies to reinforce this message, as Iran has always been more sensitive to multilateral pressure.

Conclusions

No single step, by itself, will solve the problem. Measures such as those recommended above, will help the United States stop terrorist groups from acquiring WMD and otherwise prepare our country better for this challenge. Perhaps most important, the United States must think of this problem strategically, ensuring that different components of U.S. national power are working together rather than in isolation. Bringing U.S. power together effectively requires a strong interagency process, effective political leadership, and aggressive oversight efforts.