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US Nuclear Weapons Policy After September 11th

By David Krieger

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush gathered together his top security advisors to consider the implications of terrorism for US nuclear policy. A few facts were clear. There were well-organized and suicidal terrorists who were committed to inflicting large-scale damage on the US. These terrorists had attempted to obtain nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. They probably had not succeeded yet in obtaining nuclear weapons, but would certainly keep trying to do so. It was highly unlikely that terrorists would be able to deliver nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction by means of missiles, but they could potentially smuggle one or more nuclear weapons into the United States and use them to attack US cities. The death and destruction would be enormous, dwarfing the damage caused on September 11th.

These facts alarmed the Bush security advisors. They went to work immediately developing plans to protect the American people against the possible nuclear terrorism that threatened American cities. The first prong of their defense against nuclear terrorism was to call for dramatically increased funding to secure the nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union. Encouraged by the success that had been achieved up to this point with the Nunn-Lugar funding, they realized that this was an area in which they could work closely with Russia in assuring that these weapons were kept secure and out of the hands of criminals and terrorists. The Russians were eager to get this help and to join with the Americans in this effort to prevent nuclear terrorism.

The second prong of the US plan was to work with the Russians in achieving significant reductions in the nuclear arsenals of each country in order that there would be less nuclear weapons available to potentially fall into the hands of terrorists. Since the end of the Cold War the US and Russia have been reducing their nuclear arsenals, and now it was time to make even greater progress toward the promise of the two countries "to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals." This meant reaching an agreement as a next step to slash the size of their arsenals to a few hundred nuclear warheads and to make these reductions irreversible. The international community applauded the boldness of this step, celebrating this major achievement in nuclear disarmament and this important step toward realizing the promise of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The third prong of the US plan was to give its full support to bringing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force, giving momentum to assuring an end to nuclear testing for all time. This step was viewed by the Bush security advisors as having indirect consequences for nuclear terrorism by assuring that other countries would forego the capability to improve the sophistication of their nuclear arsenals. It would be seen as a sign of US leadership for a world free of nuclear weapons, and this would have a positive effect on preventing further proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The fourth prong of the US plan was to reevaluate the administration's commitment to developing and deploying missile defenses. Prior to September 11th, President Bush and his security team had been strong advocates of developing and deploying ballistic missile defenses. President Bush had even been threatening to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to move forward with missile defense deployment. Following September 11th, it was clear that it made little sense to devote another \$100 billion or more to missile defenses when terrorists were capable of attacking US cities by far simpler means. There were more urgent needs for these resources to be used in improving US intelligence and

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keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists. Therefore, the decision was made to put the development of missile defenses on the back burner and instead devote major resources to safeguarding nuclear materials throughout the world. These actions were extremely helpful in improving our relations with both Russia and China, which were both relieved at not having to respond to our missile defenses by increasing their nuclear arsenals.

The fifth prong of the US plan was to work intensively with countries such as India, Pakistan and Israel to convince them that nuclear weapons were not in their security interests and that they would have a heavy price to pay if they did not join us in moving rapidly toward a nuclear-weapons-free world. The Bush advisors knew that this would be difficult, but they were certain that the US example of curtailing its own nuclear arsenal and foregoing missile defenses, along with support to these countries for economic development, would convince them to follow our lead.

The world's leaders and citizens have not heard about these US actions to combat nuclear terrorism because they never happened. The description above is an imaginative account of what might have happened – what should have happened. The most remarkable reality about the US response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 is how little these attacks actually affected US nuclear policy. Although US nuclear forces will certainly not deter terrorists, US nuclear policy remains highly dependent on nuclear weapons and the policy of nuclear deterrence.

To set the record straight, the Bush administration has supported cuts in the Nunn-Lugar funding for securing Russian nuclear weapons and materials. It has called for reductions in deployed strategic nuclear weapons over a ten-year period, although not within the scope of a binding treaty and, in fact, has indicated it plans to put the deactivated warheads on the shelf for potential future use. It has come out against ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and boycotted a UN conference to bring the treaty into force more rapidly. President Bush has announced that the US will unilaterally withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and move forward rapidly to deploy ballistic missile defenses, a move that has drawn critical response from both Russia and China. Finally, the Bush administration, rather than putting pressure on India and Pakistan to disarm, has ended the sanctions imposed on them for testing nuclear weapons in May 1998. The administration has never put pressure on Israel to eliminate its nuclear arsenal, although this is a major factor in motivating Arab countries to develop their own nuclear arsenals.

While there is much the Bush administration might have done to make nuclear terrorism less likely, the path they have chosen increases the risks of nuclear terrorism. It also undermines our relationship with countries we need in the fight against terrorism in general and nuclear terrorism in particular. Finally, the US nuclear policy after September 11th is a slap in the face to the 187 parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and increases the possibilities of nuclear proliferation and a breakdown of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and regime.

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Perspectives on Terrorist Attacks

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