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Joseph Cirincione

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PROLIFERATION THREATS AND SOLUTIONS†

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE*

I was just in Berlin very recently, meeting with senior ministry officials and some of the best experts in Europe on proliferation strategy. One of the German officials said to me, “You know what we hear from America? All we hear is ‘Be afraid.’” The U.S. warnings of imminent danger do not resonate across the oceans. Europeans do not see the problems the same way we do. We look at Iran and see a threat that has to be confronted; they see a problem that has to be managed. They see terrorism as a serious problem, but not as the overwhelming, terrifying threat we believe it to be. As much as I disagree with some of the administration’s policies, I am basically in agreement that we have a very serious problem with terrorism that we must confront. I agree with Dale Watson: we have to be on the offensive in this strategy because there are evil men out there who want to kill us. I firmly believe that nuclear terrorism is our number one security threat. If the terrorists get a nuclear device, they will use it.

We know that terrorists have been trying to get a nuclear device. *The 9/11 Commission Report*,¹ for example, documented efforts by Usama bin Laden to buy a significant quantity of highly enriched uranium—the core material for an atomic bomb. They bought what they thought was highly enriched uranium for one and one-half million dollars, though it turned out to be a scam. Clearly, they are looking for nuclear options.

I. NUCLEAR TIPPING POINT

The United States faces four primary nuclear threats, any one of which could tip over into a crisis in the next couple of

† Mr. Cirincione was the second speaker at the Symposium on Re-Thinking the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons in the Age of Terrorism hosted by the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* on November 9, 2004. See also Dale Watson, Preventing Nuclear Terrorism (Nov. 9, 2004), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 333 (2005); Jared Silberman, Non-Lethal Weaponry and Non-Proliferation (Nov. 9, 2004), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 347 (2005).

* Senior Associate and Director for Non-Proliferation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C.

1. NAT’L COMM’N ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE U.S., *THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT* 60 (2004).

years. The decisions we make in the near future will determine whether we are able to contain the dangers, or whether we tip over into a dangerous nuclear confrontation. The first and most serious nuclear threat is that of nuclear terrorism. It is a new danger that arises from the confluence of twenty-seven thousand nuclear weapons stockpiled in the world, hundreds of tons of highly enriched uranium and plutonium outside of the nuclear weapons stockpiles, and the rise of messianic groups whose intent is not to attract attention to their cause, not to make a political point, but to cause catastrophic or apocalyptic damage. Usama bin Laden wants to trigger a holy jihad; he wants a confrontation between the West and the Muslim world. Aum Shinrikyo thought, as they spread sarin nerve gas through the Tokyo subway system, that they were going to trigger an apocalyptic moment which would bring about a new nirvana in the world. These groups are not just evil, they are crazy. Now they may want to cause mass destruction through nuclear weapons. While states with territory and national futures can be deterred from using what weapon they have, terrorists cannot be deterred. These factors make terrorism the most significant nuclear threat we face. However, it is not the only nuclear threat.

We also face the threat of new nuclear weapons states, specifically, Iran and North Korea. Fortunately, the list of countries pursuing weapons is short. How we handle these countries in the very near term will decide our future for decades to come. How we conduct our relations with the Iranians over the next year will determine whether we can dissuade Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The same is true for North Korea. To be clear: the danger is not that Iran or North Korea will build a nuclear weapon and then attack us. No, deterrence is alive and well. They understand very well what would happen immediately after such an attack even if we simply suspected that the attack came from them. For example, if they launched a nuclear-armed missile, we would know within tens of seconds and within tens of meters exactly where the attack originated. Consequently, a nuclear missile attack is the least of our worries; it is the least likely delivery vehicle that these countries would use.

Likewise, we should also not be very concerned that Iran or North Korea would intentionally transfer a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group. No country has ever given a chemical, biological, or nuclear weapon to a group they could not control. Such an action would risk the possibility that the terrorist group might use the weapon against the country of origin or that there might be blowback from radiation or diseases back into the country. Most importantly, the country still risks retaliation by any target,

such as the United States, that could discern the original source of the weapon.

The primary danger to the United States and the world from the emergence of new nuclear states is the regional instability that will likely result. If Iran becomes a nuclear state, other states in the region will, for their own geo-political reasons, feel like they have to match the nuclear weapon capability in kind. For example, Egypt might restart the nuclear program that it had in the 1960s. Saudi Arabia, who heavily financed Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, might use their influence in Pakistan and invite Pakistan to station nuclear weapons on Saudi territory. Turkey would consider their nuclear options. A new government in Iraq, if there is a stable government in Iraq at that point, might consider restarting Iraq's nuclear effort. In sum, there would be a chain reaction throughout the region surrounding a new nuclear state. Suddenly, a Middle East with one nuclear power—Israel—would become a region of two, three, or four nuclear powers. This scenario, in combination with existing unresolved tensions, political disputes, and territorial and religious disputes, would be a recipe for nuclear war.

The third danger the United States faces is the danger from existing arsenals of nuclear weapons. There are about twenty-eight thousand nuclear weapons in the world. The United States has ten thousand, Russia has seventeen thousand. When one speaks about nuclear weapons, and, for that matter, chemical weapons, one has to realize that these two countries hold the bulk of the weapons. Moreover, the United States and Russia are still in a Cold War nuclear posture. Both countries still have thousands of nuclear warheads on hair-trigger nuclear alert, ready to launch within fifteen minutes notice. This posture increases the chance of unauthorized launch, accidental launch, or failure of the Russian early warning system. For example, several years ago, Russia thought a routine launch of a Norwegian weather rocket was actually an ICBM. They could not read it accurately because their early warning system is decaying: it is a shadow of what it once was. For the first time in history, Russia came perilously close to actually launching a retaliatory strike—and this was after the Cold War had officially ended. For the first time, a Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin, had open in front of him the nuclear suitcase. One push of a button would have launched the weapon. Fortunately, they decided it could not possibly be the United States attacking Russia, so they closed the suitcase and backed off. They found out the truth a few minutes later—but a repeat of that situation is all too possible, perhaps when relations are not as cordial or not as trusting. We have to do more to take

the Cold War weapons off alert and to eliminate them. U.S. and Russian deployment of thousands of nuclear weapons no longer serve any conceivable military mission.

The fourth danger the United States faces is a diplomatic danger: the collapse of the existing arms proliferation regime, that network of treaties, agreements, and arrangements that have been in place for the last fifty years. This has the potential to become the most perilous of the dangers. Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, worked together over the past decades to slow, if not prevent altogether, the spread of nuclear weapons. Forty-four years ago, in the 1960 presidential debate, young Senator John Kennedy challenged Vice President Richard Nixon. Attacking him from the right, he said that the Eisenhower administration had not done enough to protect the national security of the United States and that Eisenhower should have concluded a comprehensive nuclear test ban and stopped atmospheric nuclear tests. If the United States failed to act, he said, the four nuclear nations that then existed, the United States, Russia, Great Britain, and France (which had detonated a bomb in 1960), could mushroom into fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five nuclear nations. Kennedy was not worried about rogue states. No, he was worried about existing industrially developed countries that possessed the capability to build weapons, and were actually pursuing, or considering, nuclear weapons programs of their own. Sweden had a program for nuclear weapons. Switzerland was considering a program. Germany and Japan had politicians advocating nuclear weapons programs. Remember, this was fifteen years after World War II. The idea of Germany and Japan obtaining nuclear weapons was not particularly comforting, even though they were U.S. allies. Fortunately, Kennedy acted, beginning negotiations for the Non-Proliferation Treaty. He could not finish the job. President Johnson completed the negotiations, with President Nixon signing the treaty, putting the framework in place.

Specifically, the Treaty said that the five countries with nuclear weapons (China had joined the club by then) would reduce their arsenals, eventually eliminating them. The other signatories promised not to pursue nuclear weapons. Overall, the deal has held fairly well. The world has averaged one new member of the nuclear club every decade: Israel developed nuclear weapons in secret in 1968, and now has an arsenal of about one hundred nuclear weapons; Pakistan and India were secretly working on and tested nuclear weapons in 1998. Consequently, the world now has eight nuclear states, with North Korea

possibly in possession of a nuclear weapon and Iran knocking on the door.

In essence, the treaty will only survive if countries believe in the pyramid scheme of non-proliferation. Like a con artist's scam, the regime only works if people keep investing in it. Without faith in this regime, countries will reconsider their nuclear options—and there are two to three dozen countries that could build nuclear weapons quickly but have made the political decision not to do so. Japan, for example, could have a nuclear weapon within thirty days. They have the material, they have the know-how, they may even have a design.

The dangers of nuclear terrorism, regional arms races fueled by new nuclear states and unresolved disputes, huge nuclear stockpiles on alert, and the collapse of the non-proliferation framework are the greatest nuclear threats facing the United States and the world. It is like playing four-dimensional chess. The United States has to deal on all of these levels at once—to move multiple pieces at once, keeping in mind that a move on one level affects the move on another. For example, if we cannot contain Iran, Iran will add another nuclear stockpile subject to the risk of terrorist theft, and trigger a ripple effect in the Middle East encouraging the creation of additional nuclear states and stockpiles, likely resulting in the collapse of the non-proliferation regime and a halt in reductions in the arsenals of the United States and Russia.

II. NUCLEAR SOLUTIONS

What is the current policy for dealing with this? For years, after the Cold War ended officials and experts saw the threat as “the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.” They saw the weapons themselves as the problem, as we had since John F. Kennedy's era. As long as these weapons existed, somebody would use them. As Kennedy said, “We must abolish the weapons of war before they abolish us.” Richard Nixon led the way on biological weapons, unilaterally destroying the U.S. stockpile of thousands of bio-weapons and negotiated a treaty to eliminate them world wide. Today, very few countries play around with biological weapons, but they are still serious threats. George H.W. Bush led the way on chemical weapons, negotiating a chemical weapons convention to rid the world of these deadly arsenals. Very few countries have chemical weapons now, but a handful still hold stockpiles. Most of these countries are in the Middle East. It is time to get rid of the weapons.

The idea is the same with nuclear non-proliferation, which has worked to limit the threat of nuclear weapons. Arsenals are coming down. There are about half as many nuclear weapons in the world now as there were fifteen years ago. There are fewer countries pursuing these weapons, and there are fewer countries contemplating weapon programs.

George W. Bush came into office with a radically different formula. In his 2002 State of the Union speech, he said that the danger is “outlaw regimes with nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.” In other words, it is not the weapons, but who has the weapons. He changed the issue from “what” to “who.” Then we start picking and choosing—it is okay that India has nuclear weapons, but it is not okay that Iraq has nuclear weapons. It is okay that Israel has nuclear weapons, but it is not okay that Iran has nuclear weapons. It is okay that we have nuclear weapons, but it is not okay that North Korea has nuclear weapons. The strategy becomes not eliminating the weapons, but eliminating the regimes. The logic is to go to the source of the problem and knock off the “whom.” Why? Because we can. We have the physical military capability. We are going to stop this threat with pre-emptive action before it develops.

It was this strategy that led directly to the Iraq War. Moreover, the Iraq War is supposed to be the model. It is supposed to be a message to Iran and North Korea. It is supposed to be a warning that if you pursue these programs, we are going to come after you, and we are going to kill you. There are costs to pursuing these programs, so do not pursue the programs.

Now we get to the problem. The strategy has backfired. The strategy, which looked so attractive, which we thought was going to be so effective, has been very, very costly. One thousand, one hundred thirteen Americans have died in the war before the Fallujah offensive. It has cost two hundred billion dollars. We have fractured alliances. We have increased animosity throughout the Muslim world. We have the worst reputation we have ever had in our history with the Arab nations. This is a very costly strategy. It makes it more difficult to pursue the war on terrorism, more difficult to forge joint operations against terrorism and proliferation. What is more, the Iranian and North Korean programs have accelerated—they have advanced in the last four years, and particularly in the last two years, not contracted.

A key part of the problem is bad math. It is extremely important that threat assessments are accurate. The math that the administration used, as the President has said, concluded that the nexus of greatest danger comes at the intersection of

terrorists, weapons of mass destruction, and outlaw states. At first that seemed to make a lot of sense, and maybe you still think it makes sense. Most dangerous people, plus most dangerous weapons, plus most dangerous states must equal the greatest threat.

However, if you are Usama bin Laden, and you want nuclear weapons, where do you go? You do not go to Iran—it does not have nuclear weapons. You do not go to Iraq, we know they do not have nuclear weapons. Usama can not even go to North Korea because they are not going to give him nuclear weapons. Where do you go? You take a lesson from Willie Sutton, the 1930's bank robber. Willie was asked why he robbed banks? Because, he said, that's where the money is. Where are the nuclear weapons? The nuclear weapons are in Russia—and in any state stockpile that is vulnerable to threat or diversion, particularly Pakistan's. If you are worried about Usama bin Laden getting a nuclear weapon, you have to worry about the seventeen thousand nuclear weapons, some of which are in very insecure storage in Russia, and the hundreds of tons of highly enriched uranium and plutonium, some of which are stored in facilities that are protected literally by a fence, a padlock, and a guard that works days. If you want to stop nuclear terrorism you have to get to those materials, to work with the host nations to get rid of them, or secure them before Usama bin Laden can get his evil hands on them. As former Senator Sam Nunn says, we are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe. It is the race of our lives.

We have government programs in place that can do this, and we have been working on it for the past ten years. They are called the Nunn-Lugar programs. The approach is to eliminate the stockpiles, and we have made tremendous progress. In ten years, forty percent of the stockpiles are now secure. That, my friends, is not good enough. Sam Nunn, in his great Southern way, says a gazelle fleeing a cheetah is taking a step in the right direction. However, it is not a question of direction; it is a question of speed. We are not moving fast enough.

One of the debating points in the 2004 Presidential Election was that John Kerry said he was going to get the job done in the next four years, not in the next ten years as currently planned. The current administration is still piddling along with budgets of about one billion dollars a year on these programs. Kerry said he would triple that amount. More than that, there are these stockpiles of nuclear material out there in reactors in about forty other nations. People have civilian research reactors that the Russians and we sold them during the 1950's and 1960's that use

highly enriched uranium. The fuel is ideal for terrorist use—you can simply take it and put it in a bomb.

The hardest thing for a terrorist to do in constructing a nuclear weapon is getting the material. Every step after that is easier for them and harder for us to stop. The designs are well known. If they can get the material, either a softball sized chunk of highly enriched uranium, twenty-five kilograms, or about four or five kilograms of plutonium, the designs are pretty well known. There is enough technology, and there are enough scientists on the market that they can bribe or coerce to help. Once they put it in a package, delivery is easy. As Kerry said during the campaign, most of our cargo is not inspected when it comes into this country. All you need to do is put it on a cargo ship heading into lower Manhattan, and way before it gets to customs you can detonate the device.

The answer is to go secure that material. Here is the good news. I think this administration is now seriously interested in pursuing the material. They have not done it in the last two years, but there are a lot of indications that I see that they are interested in speeding up, and putting more money into these programs. The administration recently started a program called the Global Threat Reduction Initiative to bring this fuel back to the countries of origin and to convert the reactors to low enriched uranium that cannot be used in bombs. That is one of the initiatives that I personally will be working to accelerate over the next year, and that is one of the steps we advocate in a strategy document entitled *Universal Compliance*.² We will be talking with the administration intensely over the next few months to try to convince our government officials to put more money into these kinds of programs. The best way to stop nuclear terrorists is to stop them from getting the material in the first place.

There's a lot more—I am going to close my remarks out here because I am out of time. If you are interested, please go to our website to download and view the final Carnegie report. You can also get the latest news and resources at the site, just go to ProliferationNews.org. Stay involved, stay informed. I'm happy to talk to you more about this, and I look forward to your questions and the discussion period to follow.

2. GEORGE PERKOVICH, JESSICA MATHEWS, JOSEPH CIRINCIONE, ROSE GOTTEMOELLER & JOHN WOLFSTHAL, *UNIVERSAL COMPLIANCE: A STRATEGY FOR NUCLEAR SECURITY* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2005), available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/strategy>.