

Making America Safer from Nuclear Terrorism

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American politics may be deeply polarized, but there appears to be a virtual unanimity about what constitutes the greatest threat to our national security. When asked that question during the first presidential debate of 2004, Senator Kerry's immediate answer was, "nuclear proliferation," because "there are terrorists trying to get their hands on that stuff." President Bush concurred: "I agree with my opponent that the biggest threat facing this country today is weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a terrorist network."¹

That assessment was buttressed by the 9/11 Commission's official report, which documented in chilling detail Al Qaeda's search for nuclear weapons. The report concluded, "Al Qaeda has tried to acquire or make weapons of mass destruction for at least ten years. There is no doubt the United States would be a prime target."² In August 2001, for instance, during the final countdown to what Al Qaeda calls the "Holy Tuesday" attack, bin Laden received two key former officials from Pakistan's nuclear weapons program at his secret headquarters near Kabul. Over the course of three days of intense conversation, he and his second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, quizzed Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed about chemical, biological, and especially nuclear weapons. Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and the two other as yet unidentified, top-level Al Qaeda operatives who participated in these conversations had clearly moved beyond the impending assault on the World Trade Center to visions of grander attacks to follow.³

The threats do not stop at Al Qaeda. Islamist websites reveal growing interest in nuclear bombs as weapons of jihad. "An Encyclopedia for the Preparation of Nuclear Weapons," has begun appearing in the virtual

training library of some jihadist websites.⁴ No matter how much or how little the author knows about nuclear physics, the title, “The Nuclear Bomb of Jihad and the Way to Enrich Uranium,” makes clear that intent is not the missing ingredient to a nuclear terrorist attack.







Yet, distracted by Iraq, political scandals, and hurricanes, the U.S. government has failed to take the steps required to dramatically reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism. As recently as December 5, 2005, the members of the 9/11 Commission, operating with private funding to follow up on their official mandate, gave the administration and Congress a “D” for their efforts to prevent terrorists from acquiring WMD.⁵ As the Commission Chairman Thomas Kean noted, “the size of the problem still totally dwarfs the policy response.”⁶

What has happened while the administration’s attention has been diverted to the Iraq War? In the past three years, North Korea has reprocessed enough plutonium for eight nuclear bombs, restarted its Yongbyon reactor where it is producing enough plutonium for two additional bombs a year, and has thus crossed a line President Bush has repeatedly declared would be “intolerable.” It has even threatened to sell weapons to others including terrorists.⁷ Defying the U.N. Security Council’s demand that it suspend uranium enrichment-related activity at Isfahan and Natanz, Iran is accelerating its program and making threats to “wipe Israel off the map.”⁸ Once Tehran completes its industrial-scale facilities for producing highly enriched uranium, we face the nightmarish prospect that it might transfer nuclear weapons to its terrorist client and collaborator, Hezbollah, a group that has already killed 260 Americans in attacks in Lebanon and at Khobar Towers. In addition, research reactors in forty developing and transitional countries still hold the essential ingredient for nuclear bombs.

A nuclear terrorist attack on an American city would be a world-altering event. The gravity of the potential consequences requires that policy-makers give absolute priority to this challenge. The largely unrecognized good news is that nuclear terrorism is, in fact, *preventable*—preventable by a feasible, affordable checklist of actions.

The strategic narrows is preventing terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons or the materials from which weapons could be made. If this choke-point can be squeezed tightly enough, we can deny terrorists the means necessary for the most deadly of all terror acts. As a fact of physics: no highly enriched uranium or plutonium, no nuclear explosion, no nuclear terrorism. It is that simple.

Preventing Nuclear Terrorism: Report Card

Subject	1st Term Trend	Grade	2nd Term Trend	Grade
No Loose Nukes		D+		
No New Nascent Nukes		D-		
No New Nuclear Weapons States		F		

A strategy for pursuing that agenda can be organized under a Doctrine of Three No’s: No Loose Nukes, No New Nascent Nukes and No New Nuclear Weapons States.⁹ On all three fronts, the Administration’s first-term performance can be summed up by one word: unacceptable.

No Loose Nukes requires securing all nuclear weapons and weapons-usable material, on the fastest possible timetable, to a new “gold standard.” Locking up valuable or dangerous items is something we know how to do. The United States does not lose gold from Fort Knox, nor Russia treasures from the Kremlin armory. Washington and Moscow should jointly develop a standard and then act at once to secure their own nuclear materials. Russian President Vladimir Putin must come to feel this in his gut as an existential threat to Russia. Moscow must see safeguarding those weapons not as a favor to the United States but as an essential protection for its own country and citizens.

With Putin aboard, the U.S. and Russia should launch a new “Global Alliance Against Nuclear Terrorism.” Its mission would be to lock down all weapons and materials everywhere and clean out what cannot be locked down. This would require engaging the leaders of other nuclear states on the basis of a bedrock of vital national interest:

prevent a nuclear bomb from going off in my capital. The global clean-out of at-risk nuclear material must be accelerated to finish the job in the next 12–18 months.

No New Nascent Nukes means no new national capabilities to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. A loophole in the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty allows states to develop these capacities as civilian programs, withdraw from the Treaty, utilize equipment and know-how received as a beneficiary of the Treaty, and proceed to build nuclear weapons. The proposition of no new nascent nukes acknowledges what the national security community is just beginning to realize: highly enriched uranium and plutonium are bombs just about to hatch.

The crucial challenge to this principle today is *Iran*. Preventing Iranian completion of its nuclear infrastructure will require a combination of enticing incentives and credible threats to persuade Tehran to accept a grand bargain for denuclearization. The U.S. should engage Iran in direct negotiations in coordination with a six-party complement that includes the EU3 and Russia. The U.S. threatens what Iran's leadership worries about most: namely, regime change—President Bush's announced goal in his declaration of the “axis of evil.” Despite American difficulties in reconstructing a post-Saddam Iraq, Iran's leaders took note of U.S. military capabilities that destroyed in a mere two weeks their most hated and feared adversary. President Bush should be prepared to give Tehran a security assurance that the U.S. will not attack Iran to change its regime by force as long as it complies with the terms of a moratorium on nuclear enrichment activity and permits intrusive IAEA inspections. These inspections must exceed the Additional Protocol to assure that the moratorium is observed not only at Isfahan and Natanz, but everywhere in Iran.

The partners should bring to these negotiations all the carrots the international community can reasonably provide Iran. These include a formal Iranian-E.U. agreement for significantly increased trade and investments; the opportunity to purchase additional civilian nuclear reactors from Russia (Iranian plans call for ten over the next decade); assured supply of fuel for nuclear reactors from internationally-supervised suppliers as proposed by IAEA Director, Mohamed Elbaradei, to include Russia, the E.U, the U.S., and a special IAEA-controlled “reserve of last resort” against the extreme contingency that supply of fuel were

to be interrupted for noncommercial reasons; spare parts from the U.S. for Iran's aging aircraft; an opportunity to buy new Airbus aircraft from Europe; the beginning of negotiations with the WTO about membership; and a commitment to six-party talks about Iran's larger security concerns and those of the region. This package could also include an offer by the U.S. to open its embassy in Tehran and allow the Islamic Republic to open an embassy in Washington and to begin discussion about normalization of relations.

Carrots alone, however, will not suffice. Crucial to sealing this deal will be a judgment by Iran's leaders that they have no realistic prospect of enriching uranium at an industrial scale. Essential to that judgment is a credible military threat to destroy the facilities before they can become operational.

What remains for this deal to come together is for the U.S. to step up as determined dealmaker, assemble the full array of international carrots, and package a deal Iran cannot reasonably refuse.

No New Nuclear Weapons States draws a bright line under the current eight nuclear powers and says unambiguously: "no more." The urgent test of this principle is North Korea, which now stands halfway across that line. Preventing Pyongyang from becoming a "Nukes R Us" for terrorists is the biggest challenge the international community faces in the Asian arena.

In the case of North Korea, sharp internal divisions paralyzed the first term of the Bush administration. As a result, it followed a policy of insult and neglect, refusing to offer any carrots or threaten any sticks. In Cheney's words, "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it."¹⁰ Despite the tough talk, however, the administration let the problem fester while Pyongyang added to its arsenal.

In its second term, the Bush administration has made a much stronger start on this agenda. The best hope for resolution starts with the Joint Declaration at last September's six-party talks in which North Korea committed itself to "abandon all nuclear weapons and existing programs and return, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards."¹¹ Between those words and the realization of this objective lies a long, steep road—every step of which will be complex and contested. The first step must be a North Korean freeze of its Yongbyon reactor and the associated repro-

cessing facility that is producing an additional two bombs worth of plutonium annually. Persuading Kim Jong Il to take even this step has so far proved impossible for the other members of the six-party talks.

Between North Korea and Washington there is zero trust. Each believes it was cheated by the other in prior agreements, and the evidence supports both parties' claims. Given this deep distrust, China is the state best situated to play a critical role. When China earlier interrupted the flow of oil to Pyongyang "for technical reasons," North Korea's response was swift and compliant. China will thus have to be a central actor in the design of a mini-step-by-mini-step process in which the other five members of the six-party talks provide benefits to North Korea for the freeze and ultimate dismantling of its nuclear weapons infrastructure.

From the outset, the six-party talks have been stalemated by the fact that the stated U.S. objective—collapse of the North Korean regime—is China's worst nightmare. In China's dominant narrative, it entered the Korean War to prevent a U.S.-allied government on its border with Korea. As a concession to China, the Bush Administration should subordinate North Korean regime change to stopping North Korea's nuclear program. This should include an assurance that the U.S. will not station troops in North Korea in any circumstance. President Bush should make such a pledge immediately. The United States must demonstrate readiness to join in multi-national Chinese-led assurances that North Korea will not be attacked as long as it observes constraints on further production or export of nuclear materials, and begins small steps toward eliminating its nuclear arsenal.

With these carrots from the U.S., South Korean willingness to deepen economic relations and eventually reunify the Korean peninsula, and the economic and technical assistance Japan and China clearly have on offer, China should be able to persuade North Korea's Kim Jong Il to freeze current nuclear activities.

In addition, the responsible members of the international community should articulate credibly a principle of nuclear accountability. States should be held accountable for nuclear weapons and nuclear material they produce. North Korea should be put on notice that any nuclear attack using a weapon or weapon built from fissile material that originated within its borders will be treated as an attack by North Korea and will be met with "a full retaliatory response."

The “No New Nuclear Weapon States” piece of the challenge will be easier in the long run if the U.S. and other nuclear weapon states devalue nuclear weapons. Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons legally requires nuclear-weapon states to make “good faith” efforts towards disarmament. Steps such as reducing the overall number of deployed warheads from their current levels, and forswearing new nukes including the so-called “bunker busters” would give the U.S., Russia, and the other nuclear haves greater credibility in building a global consensus around the Three No’s. Other lower-hanging fruit for legislators could include legislation to ban nuclear weapons testing for a 10-year period (if the CTBT proves too much of a stretch), and adopting the necessary laws so that the Additional Protocol to the IAEA safeguards agreement can take effect in the United States. The U.S. would also have much greater moral authority to deal with Iran if Washington agreed to a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty—essentially reminding to world that if the U.S. has no need for new fissile material, then neither does Iran.

Preventing a terrorist nuclear attack on an American city is not an issue for Republicans or Democrats. As the nation has learned from Hurricane Katrina, when disaster strikes, citizens will ask what everyone with authority did—or failed to do. In an age when terrorists target civilians with acts of unprecedented destruction, preventing nuclear terrorism cannot be pushed off into the “too hard” category. All elected leaders must understand the agenda of actions necessary to prevent nuclear terrorism and continually drill down on tasks left unfinished. Politicians from both sides of the aisle must keep up the pressure on the president and his renewed administration to rise to this challenge.

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APPENDIX: ACTIONS TO PREVENT NUCLEAR TERRORISM

No Loose Nukes

Actions Required for A-level Performance:

- Make preventing nuclear terrorism an “absolute priority”
- Presidents of the U.S. and Russia and their national security teams must feel the *existential threat* to their nations
- U.S. and Russian leaders jointly develop a new “gold standard” to which all nuclear weapons and materials will be secured to assure no nuclear weapons or materials are stolen
- Personally pledge to each other that all nuclear weapons and materials on each president’s territory will be secured to the gold standard on the fastest technically possible timetable
- Appoint individuals of stature reporting directly to U.S. and Russian presidents as commanders in the war on nuclear terrorism
- Include leaders of other nuclear states in a new Alliance Against Nuclear Terrorism (mission: to minimize the risk of nuclear terrorism)
- Accelerate Global Threat Reduction Initiative to take back Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) from both Soviet- and U.S.-supplied research reactors on fastest technically feasible timetable

No New Nascent Nukes

Actions Required for A-level Performance:

- Orchestrate consensus that there will be no new national HEU enrichment or plutonium reprocessing
- Close current NPT loophole that permits signatories to develop nuclear fuel production capabilities
- Guarantee supply of reactor fuel to non-nuclear weapons states at prices less than half national production costs
- Organize program to securely store spent fuel from civilian reactors
- Persuade all states to adopt the Additional Protocol
- Limit import of equipment for existing civilian programs to states that have signed Additional Protocol
- Expand Proliferation Security Initiative beyond current states
- Accelerate and highlight deep cuts in U.S.-Russian nuclear arms, and minimize role of nuclear weapons as fulfillment of NPT Article IV
- Resume Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) negotiations
- Make grand bargain with Iran: in exchange for dismantlement of enrichment and reprocessing facilities, offer fuel-cycle agreement, acceptance of Bushehr, relaxation of trade sanctions, and security guarantee
- Pose credible threats to Iran sufficient to persuade it to accept grand bargain.

No New Nuclear States

Actions Required for A-level Performance:

- Draw bright line under today's eight nuclear powers and declare: no more
- Subordinate all other policy objectives on N. Korea (e.g., regime change) to this goal
- Offer carrots in exchange for verifiable dismantlement: bilateral non-aggression pledge, expansion of food aid, resumption of Japan-S. Korea fuel shipments
- Describe further benefits in a step-by-step plan to roll back N. Korea's nuclear program: financing for natural gas pipeline, construction of a light-water reactor, aid for infrastructure reconstruction, N. Korean Nunn-Lugar, eventual normalization or relations
- Pose credible threat to North Korea sufficient to persuade it to choose freeze and start down path to eliminate nuclear weapons
- Ratify Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)

NOTES

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4. MEMRI, "On Islamic Websites: A Guide for Preparing Nuclear Weapons" *Special Dispatch Series* No. 1004. October 12, 2005.
5. 9/11 Public Discourse Project, "Final Report on 9/11 Commission Recommendations," December 5, 2005. www.9-11pdp.org
6. 9/11 Public Discourse Project, "Opening Remarks of Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton," November 14, 2005. www.9-11pdp.org
7. Reportedly, a North Korean Foreign Ministry official told Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly that Pyongyang will "export nuclear weapons, add to its current arsenal or test a nuclear device." (Bill Gertz, "N. Korea Threatens to Export Nukes," *Washington Times*, May 7, 2003, p. A1.)
8. Iran News, "A pre-staged crisis," October 29, 2005.
9. Expanded in Part II of *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004).
10. Warren P. Strobel, "Vice President's Objections Blocked Planned North Korean Nuclear Talks," *Knight Ridder*, December 20, 2003.
11. "Full text: N Korea nuclear agreement," BBC News, September 18, 2005.