

The Threat of Loose Nukes Is One of Our Own Making

Written by

Monday, 20 September 2004 05:50 - Last Updated Monday, 20 September 2004 05:50

With U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces still on hair-trigger alert, we need to recognize that present policies for reducing the

risk of nuclear strikes against the United States by terrorists or

rogue countries are inconsistent and self-defeating.

The Wrong Deterrence

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By Bruce Blair

Sunday, September 19, 2004

Nuclear terrorism, thankfully, is still only a specter, not a

reality. But the recent wave of bloodshed in Russia underscores the

urgency of the need to prevent terrorists capable of indiscriminate

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slaughter from acquiring nuclear bombs.

To its credit, the Bush administration has finally launched an

ambitious initiative to better secure nuclear and radiological

materials, particularly in violence-racked Russia. But unless the

Global Threat Reduction Initiative, which was introduced in May,

becomes part of a far more comprehensive approach to the challenges

of nuclear theft and terrorism, it is destined to fall well short of

its goal of safeguarding the American people from the threat of

nuclear weapons.

The initiative builds on the bilateral nonproliferation efforts of

the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, a U.S.

government-funded, post-Cold War effort that focused on securing

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Russia's nuclear arsenal. The new, expanded cooperative effort seeks

to collect weapons-grade plutonium and enriched uranium that could

be used in nuclear bombs from dozens of additional countries, and to

lock them down in secure facilities.

But with U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces still on

hair-trigger alert, we need to recognize that present policies for

reducing the risk of nuclear strikes against the United States by

terrorists or rogue countries are inconsistent and self-defeating.

On the one hand, in the name of deterrence, U.S. and Russian

strategic nuclear forces both comply with their presidents'

instructions to be constantly prepared to fight a large-scale

nuclear war with each other at a moment's notice. On the other hand,

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in the name of nonproliferation, the United States and Russia

cooperate closely in securing Russia's nuclear weapons against

theft.

By keeping thousands of nuclear weapons poised for immediate launch,

even under normal peacetime circumstances, the United States

projects a powerful deterrent threat at Russia. But at the same

time, it causes Russia to retain thousands of weapons in its

operational inventory, scattered across that country's vast

territory, and to keep them ready for rapid use in large-scale

nuclear war with America. And to maintain the reliability of these

far-flung weapons, Russia must constantly transport large numbers

back and forth between a remanufacturing facility and the dispersed

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military bases. This perpetual motion creates a serious

vulnerability, because transportation is the Achilles' heel of

nuclear weapons security.

On any given day, many hundreds of Russian nuclear weapons are

moving around the countryside. Nearly 1,000 of them are in some

stage of transit or temporary storage awaiting relocation at any

time. This constant movement between the far-flung nuclear bases and

the remanufacturing facility at Ozersk in the southern Urals stems

from the esoteric technical fact that Russian nuclear bombs are

highly perishable. In contrast to American bombs, which have a shelf

life of more than 30 years, Russian bombs last only eight to 12

years before corrosion and internal decay render them unreliable --

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prone to fizzling instead of exploding. At that point, they must be

shipped back to the factory for remanufacturing. Every year many

hundreds of bombs, perhaps as many as a thousand, roll out of

Russia's Mayak factory. The United States turns out fewer than 10

per year. In Russia, the rail and other transportation lines linking

the factory to the far-flung nuclear bases across 10 time zones are

buzzing with nuclear activity and provide fertile ground for

terrorist interception.

Keeping a small strategic arsenal consolidated at a limited number

of locations close to the Mayak factory would be the ideal security

environment for preventing Russian nuclear bombs from falling into

terrorist hands. But the ongoing nuclear dynamic between the former

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Cold War foes creates the opposite environment, which undercuts

security. Russian nuclear commanders, confronted with U.S.

submarines lurking off their coasts with 10-minute missile-flight

times to Moscow and thousands of launch-ready U.S. warheads o-n land-

and sea-based missiles aimed at thousands of targets in Russia, are

compelled to match the American posture in numbers, alert status and

geographic dispersal. U.S. leaders must decide which goal takes

precedence: sustaining the Cold War legacy of massive arsenals to

deter a massive surprise nuclear attack, or shoring up the security

of Russian nuclear weapons to prevent terrorists from grabbing them

(or corrupt guards from stealing and selling them).

And terrorists grabbing such a weapon as it shuttles between

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deployment fields and factories is not the worst-case scenario

stemming from this nuclear gamesmanship. The theft of a nuclear bomb

could spell eventual disaster for an American city, but the seizure

of a ready-to-fire strategic long-range nuclear missile or group of

missiles capable of delivering bombs to targets thousands of miles

away could be apocalyptic for entire nations.

If scores of armed Chechen rebels were able to slip into the heart

of Moscow and hold a packed theater hostage for days, as they did in

2002, might it not be possible for terrorists to infiltrate missile

fields in rural Russia and seize control of a nuclear-armed mobile

rocket roaming the countryside?

It's an open question that warrants candid bilateral discussion of

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the prospects of terrorists capturing rockets and circumventing the

safeguards designed to foil their illicit firing, especially since

the 9/11 commission report revealed that al Qaeda plotters

considered this very idea.

Another specter concerns terrorists "spoofing" radar or satellite

sensors or cyber-terrorists hacking into early warning networks. By

either firing short-range missiles that fool warning sensors into

reporting an attack by longer-range missiles, or feeding false data

into warning computer networks, could sophisticated terrorists

generate false indications of an enemy attack that results in a

mistaken launch of nuclear rockets in "retaliation?" False alarms

have been frequent enough on both sides under the best of

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conditions.

False warning poses an acute danger as long as Russian and U.S.

nuclear commanders are given, as they still are today, o-nly several

pressure-packed minutes to determine whether an enemy attack is

underway and to decide whether to retaliate. Russia's deteriorating

early-warning network, coupled with terrorist plotting against it,

only heightens the dangers.

Russia is not the o-nly crucible of risk. The early-warning and

control problems plaguing Pakistan, India and other nuclear

proliferators are even more acute. As these nations move toward

hair-trigger stances for their nuclear missiles, the terrorist

threat to them will grow in parallel.

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Even the U.S. nuclear control apparatus is far from fool-proof. For

example, a Pentagon investigation of nuclear safeguards conducted

several years ago made a startling discovery -- terrorist hackers

might be able to gain back-door electronic access to the U.S. naval

communications network, seize control electronically of radio towers

such as the one in Cutler, Maine, and illicitly transmit a launch

order to U.S. Trident ballistic missile submarines armed with 200

nuclear warheads apiece. This exposure was deemed so serious that

Trident launch crews had to be given new instructions for confirming

the validity of any launch order they receive. They would now reject

certain types of firing orders that previously would have been

carried out immediately.

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Both countries are running terrorist risks of this sort for the sake

of an obsolete deterrent strategy. The notion that either the United

States or Russia would deliberately attack the other with nuclear

weapons is ludicrous, while the danger that terrorists are plotting

to get their hands o-n these arsenals is real. We need to kick our

old habits and stand down our hair-trigger forces. Taking U.S. and

Russian missiles off of alert would automatically reduce, if not

remove, the biggest terrorist threats that stem from keeping

thousands of U.S. and Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles

fueled, targeted and waiting for a couple of computer signals to

fire. They would fly the instant they received these signals, which

can be sent with a few keystrokes o-n a launch console.

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To keep them from flying, we ought to reverse our priorities for nuclear security. The U.S. government should not be spending 25 times more on its deterrent posture than it spends on all of our nonproliferation assistance to Russia and other countries to help them keep their nuclear bombs and materials from falling into terrorist hands. Both the United States and Russia should be spending more on de-alerting, dismantling and securing our arsenals than on prepping them for a large-scale nuclear war with each other.

The current deterrent practices of the two nuclear superpowers are not only anachronistic, they are thwarting our ability to protect ourselves against the real threats.

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