

By Nikos Lampas

A rather wide discussion takes place these days, due to the fact of the ongoing Nuclear Summit in D.C, regarding the possibility of a nuclear attack originating from non-state actors. The international community in general seems to come in terms with the possibility of terrorist organizations mounting an attack of non-conventional nature. The recent statement of President Obama that "the single biggest threat to U.S. security, both short-term, medium-term and long-term, would be the possibility of a terrorist organization obtaining a nuclear weapon," clearly enhances the insecurity that states experience regarding the dimensions of the terrorist threat. Many analysts, including highly esteemed scholars such as Sam Nunn, precipitate the insecurity that states feel by adding, "President Obama is focusing high-level attention on the threat that already exists out there, and that's tremendously important." A fundamental belief that permeates the ongoing summit is that "its key objective is to get basic consensus that nuclear terrorism is a global threat -- and needs to be a core mission of the IAEA".

It appears though as, all of a sudden, the whole wide world discovered the probability of an unconventional terrorist attack; as a result applicable measures need to be implemented in order to counter the rising threat. These measures took different forms, from economic sanctions applied to rogue states (e.g. North Korea and Iran), and culminated in the present Nuclear Summit, that aspires to establish a control safety network in order to safeguard the nuclear stockpile of many countries all over the world. The first positive signs have been given by Mexico, Ukraine and Chile that decided to remove their stockpile of low-enriched uranium. But is this the only way against the prospect of a terrorist nuclear attack? "The threat of nuclear war ... has diminished. The threat of terrorism has increased," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argues in accordance with President Obama illustrating a change in the directives that influence U.S nuclear security policy. Guidelines that are displayed in the recent Nuclear War Plan Report, which states that a new "minimal deterrence" mission, will make retaliation after nuclear attack the sole mission for nuclear weapons". Judging by the report and by the recent signature of the START treaty one could argue that the U.S is willing to sacrifice, partially, its nuclear superiority in order to increase the level of security of its stockpile. This argument is enhanced by the recent talks that take place within the Senate regarding a substantial increase of the budget for Nuclear Control, which for the fiscal year of 2009 amounted to \$1.3 billion.

Yet again a significant mistake is being done considering the origins of the threat it self. The majority of analysts argue that, the probability of terrorists acquiring nuclear material comes as a result of rogue or failing states that have nuclear capabilities, such as Iran, North Korea and Pakistan; or from the inadequately safeguarded nuclear material that exists in laboratories all over the world. Graham Allison, in his Nuclear Terrorism Fact Sheet enhances these arguments by stating that:

"How difficult would it be for terrorists to get fissile materials? Not hard enough

There are hundreds of locations holding nuclear weapons or weapons-usable material and no binding global standards for how well these weapons and materials should be secured. There are more than 130 research reactors with HEU, some of which are in developing and transitional countries.

Once nuclear material is acquired, could terrorists make a nuclear weapon? Yes

U.S. Office of Technology Assessment (1977): "A small group of people, none of whom have ever had access to the classified literature, could design and build a crude nuclear explosive device... only modest machine-shop facilities that could be contracted for without arousing suspicion would be required."

Could terrorists steal or buy HEU or Pu? Yes

In 1993, 20 bombs' worth of HEU was discovered in a poorly secured building in Kazakhstan. In 2006, Russian citizen Oleg Khinsagov was arrested in Georgia for carrying 100 grams of HEU and attempting to find a buyer for what he claimed were many additional kilograms. In 2007, two armed teams broke into South Africa's Pelindaba nuclear facility, a site where an estimated 30 weapons' worth of HEU is stored. They overcame a 10,000-volt security fence, entered without setting off an alarm, broke into the emergency control centre, shot a worker, and escaped.

Thus the question that everybody asks is in what way should the international community direct its effort to balance the phenomenon of an emerging nuclear terrorism? Should the recently signed START treaty be considered as a pavement to open the road towards the successful deterrence of terrorists? These are just a few from a vast pool of questions that should be answered in order to draw specific conclusions on how to effectively deal with the issue in question. Nevertheless I would like to draw your attention to more fundamental, in my view, components of effective strategies against non-conventional terrorist attacks. Firstly, the systemic continuations that could enhance or perhaps enable terrorists to pursue such an option. We have witnessed the effort on behalf of the previous U.S administration to enforce a "doctrine of democratization" that would act as a stability factor against the emergence of non-state actors; striking examples of that doctrine are Iraq and Afghanistan. But the "Bush Doctrine," as it was called, instead of marginalizing terrorist organizations that operated in these areas, instead brought them to the centre of attention by causing an undisputed division within the people of the invaded countries. Despite the undisputed conventional superiority of the U.S they were unable to successfully counter the emerging phenomenon of terrorist groups recruiting an even increased number of aspiring terrorists. The more disturbing fact is that there is a substantial increase in the, so called, home-grown terrorism, the Christmas eve events at Detroit airport with Abdul Mullalad yet again highlights that phenomenon. In effect terrorist networks are succeeding in creating subversion groups, according to David Killcullen, within the jurisdiction of sovereign states. These groups provide them with the necessary connection within the security framework of the government that could enable to gain access to their nuclear stockpile. If one considers the case of Pakistan you can immediately recognize the possible dangers that these subversion groups can play within the framework of the ISI.

Thus the fundamental argument of this article is that the main solution in effectively countering the possibility of terrorist attaining nuclear weapons is the systemic re-evaluation of the international system from a realist point of view, which effectively means dealing with these kinds of threats through the balance of power rhetoric as opposed to the effort to promote mass democratization. Through a realist perspective one can understand why China and Russia oppose the idea of imposing renewed sanctions in Iran due to their established commercial relations. Additionally one can safely deduce why Iran pursues a nuclear arsenal and why it actively promotes insurgency in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. By acknowledging the importance of balance of power relations one could argue that a possible nuclear attack on behalf of non-state actors would have a detrimental effect in power projection capabilities of states and could also trigger a massive spill over effect due to the nature of the structure of terrorist groups. Thus states will realize that the escalation of terrorist activities into nuclear would have a devastating effect in their own interests and would easily consider changing their mentality towards the phenomenon of terrorist and would actively pursue it instead of using it as a tool.