Combating Nuclear Terrorism: Addressing Nonstate Actor Motivations
Bonnie Jenkins

The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 2006; 607; 33
DOI: 10.1177/0002716206290450

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/607/1/33

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Yesterday's nonproliferation efforts were successful, in part, because they addressed the motives of aspiring state proliferants. Today's efforts to prevent nuclear terrorism should take a similar approach. Understanding—and addressing—the motivations of nonstate actors should be as important as locking down nuclear weapons and materials. The international community has a variety of tools at its disposal for addressing the demand for nuclear weapons. This article suggests a multifaceted approach for understanding, and reducing, the nuclear ambitions of nonstate actors.

Keywords: nuclear terrorism; nonstate actors; international treaties; norms; public diplomacy

Since the adoption of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the advent of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the international community has rigorously pursued two objectives: convincing non-nuclear-weapons states to forgo membership in the nuclear club and convincing nuclear-weapons states to reduce or limit the size of their arsenal. When a state's intention to develop or test nuclear weapons becomes known, many states will implement nuclear nonproliferation measures in response, either individually or jointly. Moreover, international nuclear nonproliferation efforts create a climate in which nuclear proliferation is seen as illegitimate. Such efforts consist of carrots (i.e., diplomatic ties and economic incentives) and sticks (i.e., sanctions and threat of military action). These

Bonnie Jenkins is a program officer for U.S. foreign and security policy at the Ford Foundation. Prior to joining Ford, she served as counsel to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States (better known as the 9/11 Commission) and as general counsel to the U.S. Commission to Assess the Organization of the Federal Government to Combat Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. She is also a U.S. naval reservist and has recently been mobilized for one year in support of Operation Noble Eagle and Enduring Freedom.
actions reduce the chance of nonproliferation by making a possible proliferant's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons more difficult, time-consuming, expensive, and likely to fail.

Nonproliferation efforts that directly address state motivations are the most likely to succeed. As W. W. Rostow noted in 1964, “If we intend to limit or stop nuclear proliferation, we must look at the specific factors which affect that calculus in different capitals and operate directly on them. What is necessary is to influence the course of behavior of states so they do not proliferate and this requires reconstructing the ‘complex calculus faced by various governments.’ ” Rostow realized that nuclear nonproliferation measures could not be considered and implemented in a vacuum; they must be pursued within the context of each nation’s motivations for seeking those weapons. More often than not, for example, states that pursue nuclear weapons to gain power or prestige are less receptive to nonproliferation efforts than states that pursue an arsenal for security or economic concerns.

Most nonproliferation measures directed at states, such as sanctions and export controls, may not be effective against nonstate actors. They may, however, be viable against states that support terrorists groups that seek nuclear weapons.

Some four decades later, Rostow’s (1964) observation remains worthy of examination, especially in light of the nuclear ambitions of some nonstate actors. International efforts used to reduce a country’s incentive to acquire nuclear weapons should also be directed at nonstate actors. When considering such measures, the international community should examine the motivations of such actors. Most nonproliferation measures directed at states, such as sanctions and export controls, may not be effective against nonstate actors. They may, however, be viable against states that support terrorists groups that seek nuclear weapons. This article’s central argument is that new ideas to stem the demand for nuclear weapons must be explored. In Rostow’s words, we must reconstruct the complex calculus of nonstate actors to understand their motivations.
Understanding the Nuclear Ambitions of Nonstate Actors

The first step in preventing nonstate actors from acquiring a nuclear capability is ensuring that existing weapons are secure from theft. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, there are more than twenty thousand nuclear weapons deployed throughout the world and another ten thousand that are inactive, in reserve status, or awaiting dismantlement. There is nuclear material in Russia that remains inadequately secured. Concerns also exist about the level of security of the nuclear weapons in Pakistan and about the inaccurate assessment of nuclear material in North Korea. Despite these concerns, however, we have a relatively good understanding of the status of nuclear weapons possessed by states.

In contrast, less attention and even fewer measures have been dedicated to the demand side of the equation—the number of nonstate groups that may seek nuclear weapons and the number of potential recruits that may want to join these groups. Reluctance to dedicate efforts to the demand side is understandable, as stemming the desire for nuclear weapons by terrorist groups is a daunting task. Assessing the underlying motivations of nonstate actors is far more difficult than measuring the number of nuclear weapons and material owned by states or determining how much it will cost to secure a facility. To be sure, barring access to nuclear materials would force nonstate actors to find other means to promote their goals. It is, however, worth exploring new ways to affect the demand for nuclear weapons by nonstate actors.

For starters, nonstate armed groups defy easy classification as their characteristics vary along almost every possible dimension: size, structure, ideology, objectives, strategies, and tactics. Classic definitions include groups that possess a hierarchical organization with a basic command structure, those that use violence for political ends, those that are independent of state control, and those that may have a degree of territorial control over a geographical area. Others argue that this classic definition is too narrow because it excludes groups that pursue a private agenda and not a political, economic, or social objective (e.g., criminal organizations, drug cartels, or private security agencies), groups that are state sponsored (e.g., paramilitaries), or transnational actors that do not claim control over a particular piece of territory (e.g., al Qaeda). In addition, some groups do not want to redefine the political and legal basis of their society but want to maintain a preexisting status quo against challengers (e.g., Afghan nonstate actor groups and Christian militias in Lebanon).

Nonstate actors can employ a range of tactics to achieve their goals, including conventional weapons, hijackings, suicide bombings, and the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. Fortunately, only a minority of these groups seek nuclear weapons. But the progression of these tactics suggests that the scope and scale of terrorism have grown in recent years. At one time, such groups were engaged in activities that caused just enough of a sensation to raise attention to...
their issues. Mass murder was not part of their agenda. Today’s terrorist groups are increasingly interested in massive and violent destruction. For these new terrorists, nuclear weapons are perfect for the purpose of inflicting massive destruction as well as augmenting their power and prestige.

Determining their motivations will be more difficult in some cases than in others. Most terrorists groups are not secretive about their intentions and want the international community to know what their grievances are. Nevertheless, while those motivations may be understood, there is no assurance that states may be able, or willing, to take the steps necessary to address those concerns. The group may have unrealistic demands that are impossible to meet. Some nonstate actors may be too intent on acquiring and threatening the use of nuclear weapons to be persuaded.

Another factor to consider in addressing the motives of terrorist groups is the increase in the number of groups whose motivations are deeply religious in nature. RAND Corporation Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Chair Bruce Hoffman noted that by 1995, twenty-six out of fifty-six known, active international terrorist groups can be classified as religious in nature or motivation. These types of groups are known to promote extreme forms of the world’s major religions, normally in the form of cults. Their incentives and motivations may be much more difficult to address than those of groups that have political motivations, such as right-wing terrorists (i.e., neo-Nazis and neo-Fascists). He also noted that deeply religious terrorist organizations like al Qaeda are more likely than political terrorist groups to seek nonconventional weapons.1

Finally, the decentralized structure of new terrorist groups makes it even more difficult to understand them and to address their motivations. The events of September 11, 2001, showed us that terrorism is a transnational problem that must be addressed through international efforts. Yet new technologies and greater geographic mobility mean that loosely connected individuals and organizations continue to function despite attempts to thwart their efforts. Even if the international community is able to address the motivation of the leaders, splinter groups may decide to continue the struggle and acquire nuclear weapons. As these small splinter groups proliferate, the task becomes more difficult.

Reducing the “Nuclear Mystique”

An important aspect of reducing the demand of nonstate actors for nuclear weapons lies in their demystification. As long as nuclear weapons are viewed as instruments of power and prestige and as valuable bargaining chips, nonstate actors will want to acquire them. The international community can take a number of steps to undermine this sentiment.

Taking steps to demystify nuclear weapons and to reduce the incentive to acquire them requires states that possess them to reduce reliance on such weapons in their own national defense strategies. These states should begin by abiding by their international legal obligations, including the reduction and eventual elimination of those weapons. The international community should find a way to convey
the notion that possessing nuclear weapons will not provide instant power status to
a nonstate actor group. States that have nuclear weapons must acknowledge the
impact their decisions to maintain their arsenal have on this issue.

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons states are not showing adequate signs of taking
significant steps toward disarmament. The failures are at the international level
as well as the individual state level. As new nuclear states, like India, Pakistan,
and North Korea, continue to proliferate, long-standing nuclear weapons states,
like the United States and France, are exploring new uses for such weapons.
Moreover, the United States and other nuclear weapons states have not been ful-
filling their obligations under Article VI of the NPT. The article requires that the
United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and France pursue negotia-
tions in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear
arms race and to eventual nuclear disarmament. Another obstacle is the fact that
the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty has not entered into force, due
to the reluctance of the United States, China, India, Israel, Pakistan, and others
to ratify the treaty.

In February 2006, French President Jacques Chirac said, “Leaders of states
who use terrorist methods against us, as well as those who consider using in one
way or another weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they would
expose themselves to a firm and appropriate response on our part. This response
could be a conventional one. It might be of a different kind” (Schwarz 2006).
Chirac’s statement specified the use of nuclear weapons against terrorists and
also lowered the threshold for the use of such weapons to include the endanger-
ment of the supply of strategic raw materials to France. The force de frappe
nuclear strike force in France has been regarded as a symbol of French strength,
and it continues to be carefully protected as a prestige project by all French pres-
idents. The United Kingdom also recently indicated its continued reliance on
nuclear weapons, arguing they are necessary because there is no assurance of
what the world will be like in twenty years (Dyer 2006).

The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty between the United States and
Russia, which stood for thirty years, was abrogated by the United States in 2001
when it withdrew from the treaty. The ABM treaty, which forbade testing and
deployment of a ballistic missile program by either party, was viewed by the
United States as hindering its ability to develop ways to protect Americans from
future terrorist or rogue state missile attacks. Doing so, however, sent a signal to
the international community that the United States would not fulfill its nuclear
nonproliferation commitments or promote the thirteen principles of the 2000
NPT Review Conference (discussed below).

In 1995, the states party to the NPT adopted the “Decision on Principles and
Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament” at the NPT Review
Conference. The 1995 decision identified three specific measures as “important”
to the “full realization and effective implementation of Article VI.” Those mea-
sures include concluding the negotiation of a verifiable Comprehensive Test Ban
Treaty (CTBT), negotiating a treaty that would end the production of fissile
materials for weapons use, and “determined pursuit by the nuclear-weapon
States of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally.” Five years later, the states party to the NPT agreed at the 2000 NPT Review Conference on a pair of ancillary documents that, in their view, provide additional guidance on what specific steps constitute evidence of compliance with Article VI of the NPT. The Final Document identified thirteen “practical steps for the systematic and progressive efforts to implement Article VI” and the 1995 Decision. There has, however, been little movement to fulfill the thirteen principles captured in the Final Document issued at the 2000 Review Conference. Finally, the NPT signatories were unable to obtain a consensus document at the treaty’s review conference in May 2005, and the heads of state at the September 2005 World Summit did not mention nonproliferation and disarmament in the final document.

In 2005, the United States and India entered into a nuclear deal that calls for broad civilian nuclear cooperation with India for the first time since India’s 1974 nuclear test explosion. At the time of this writing, the administration has sought congressional approval for exceptions to the long-standing U.S. law that bars civilian nuclear cooperation with states, such as India, that do not have comprehensive international nuclear safeguards. This deal has raised the concern of many nuclear arms control and nonproliferation proponents, who note that it goes against the spirit of the NPT and opens the door to other states to engage in similar agreements, to the detriment of the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

In addition, the United States has made efforts to develop new types of nuclear weapons. It requested funding for work on the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP), commonly referred to as the “bunker buster.” Such research would cause the United States to run afoul of its disarmament obligations under Article VI. These innovations would be designed to make the nuclear bunker buster more “usable” in actual combat operations. The fact that the United States would consider a new class of nuclear weapon does little to diminish the value of nuclear weapons. In October 2005, Congress halted the funding that was requested, citing concerns that the research “send[s] the wrong signal to the rest of the world” about the utility of nuclear weapons and America’s commitment to nuclear nonproliferation. Finally, this past February, the administration sought research funding to begin reprocessing spent fuel, something the United States abandoned in the 1970s because it was too expensive, and there was a fear that terrorist groups or rogue nations could gain access to the plutonium. This new “Global Nuclear Energy Partnership” is controversial since it raises nuclear non-proliferation and security concerns.

What the International Community Can Do

The United States and the international community can take a number of steps to reduce the likelihood that nonstate actors would seek nuclear weapons as a means of promoting their agendas.
1. We must devise innovative measures to reduce the potential number of terrorist organizations that may seek nuclear weapons by addressing the motivations of nonstate actor groups. This may require a great deal more policy innovation than currently exists and may involve opening lines of communication with some of these groups. Such an approach may be a nonstarter with some of the more fundamentalist groups but may lead to success with others. Diplomatic and economic incentives, balanced by threats of force, can also be used to persuade groups not to resort to terrorism or to discourage states from supporting those groups that do. The use of these measures regarding nonstate actors should be flexible and complementary.

2. States that possess nuclear weapons must work to reduce the perceived power and prestige that come with the acquisition and possession of such weapons. One way to do that is to abide by international treaty obligations and norms of nuclear nonproliferation. When all is said and done, the best way to prevent nonstate actors from acquiring nuclear weapons is to rid the world of such weapons. As long as states retain them, other states and nonstate actors will continue to seek them out. Nuclear weapons are viewed as a source of power not only by states but by nonstate actors as well. Steps to reduce nuclear weapons will also ensure a reduced supply of weapons terrorists can acquire. States with such weapons will always have to contend with the fact that nonstate actors can try to steal them.

Non-nuclear-weapons states have used every opportunity to pressure nuclear-weapons states to engage in disarmament negotiations, with no success. In their view, “The nuclear arsenal of the Big Five is more of a proliferant than a deterrent” (Thakur 2000). As long as the states obligated to reduce their nuclear arsenal do not, the arguments against other states and nonstate actors for wanting weapons of their own will continue to be unpersuasive and, in fact, appear discriminatory. While the United States and Russia have significantly reduced the number of their nuclear weapons, there is currently no clear plan to fulfill Article VI of the NPT. This has led to a great deal of cynicism, both by non-nuclear-weapons states and nonstate actors.

3. We must better understand how our foreign policies affect others, with particular emphasis on exploring their unintended effects. In a more general sense, the West must seek to understand how its actions will be received in other parts of the world. State actions taken in the international arena can fuel rather than diffuse the possible pool of recruits for armed nonstate actor groups by creating more incentives to join them. It is important, for example, to examine how ongoing operations in Iraq may have increased the potential pool of terrorists willing to take action. It is also possible that recent issues related to harsh detention and torture by the United States may fuel passions internationally and lead to more recruits. These types of actions should be carefully weighed by the United States and the international community before being implemented.
The effects on the larger issue of terrorism should be factored into the consideration of foreign policies. In the United States, there should be more diverse voices in foreign policy formulation to help minimize the prospect of unintended consequences. Voices from both sides of the political spectrum, from different cultures and nationalities and from different parts of the United States, should be heard. There must also be a willingness to listen to those who may not agree with our points of view and the way in which we want to devise our foreign policies. Only then can we come to fully informed conclusions. Otherwise, we risk driving blind into policy making when we devise foreign policies that do not include the viewpoints of those who would be most familiar with the effects of these policies abroad.

It is important that one look at the entire environment and culture in which the nonstate actors exist in light of the goals they wish to achieve. The international community should make an effort to understand the domestic politics, history, and culture of some of these groups, and then apply those understandings to the manner in which efforts are implemented. Any effort to work with an organization will first require an understanding of the world as seen from the view of these groups as nonstate actors who operate within their unique regional or international context. This would all take much time, energy, and patience.

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4. We must improve our public diplomacy initiatives. Public diplomacy is central to any effort to influence the motivation of nonstate actors and their support networks. The 9/11 Commission Report noted, for example, that while a small percentage of Muslims are fully committed to Osama Bin Ladin's view of Islam and are not persuadable, the United States should encourage the ideals of democracy and opportunity among the large majority of Arabs and Muslims. The United States must clearly define its message and goals and what it stands for. It must also set an example of moral leadership, treating others humanely and abiding by the rule of law (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004). Unfortunately, as recent polls continue to show, support for the United
States and its image overseas has plummeted. Public diplomacy officials, however, should have a clear understanding of what may lead individuals to join these groups and to subsequently seek out nuclear weapons to carry out their mission.

5. We must continue to secure existing nuclear weapons and fissile materials—the supply side of the equation. Ongoing efforts to address the supply side of reducing nuclear terrorism must be strengthened. Terrorists cannot acquire or develop nuclear weapons if they do not have access to the required materials or facilities. The task of securing nuclear materials, particularly those in Russia, remains unfinished. As Matthew Bunn (2005) noted, “Scores of nuclear terrorist opportunities lie in wait in countries all around the world—[at] sites that have enough nuclear material for a bomb and are demonstrably not adequately defended against the threats that terrorists and criminals have already shown they can mount.” It would also be helpful to have a better understanding of how new states acquiring nuclear materials and weapons, including North Korea and Pakistan, secure those weapons and, similarly, how secure those weapons would be if there is a change in leadership.

Conclusion

In this complex world, addressing the issue of supply of nuclear weapons and materials may not be enough to prevent a catastrophic nuclear terrorist attack. We must pay attention to the full range of issues that affect the motivations of armed nonstate actor groups that seek nuclear weapons. A more holistic approach to nonproliferation, akin to Rostow’s suggestion more than forty years ago, may be the only way to stay one step ahead of the terrorists who seek nuclear weapons as a weapon of choice to achieve their goals.

Notes

1. For Hoffman’s statistics and additional information on chemical warfare (CW) terrorism, see the Nuclear Threat Initiative’s “CW Terrorism Tutorial” at www.nti.org/h_learnmore/cwtutorial/index.html.
2. Nuclear weapons states argue that they are making progress toward eliminating their nuclear weapons and implementing their disarmament obligations.
3. The United Kingdom, France, Russia, etc., have ratified the treaty.
4. Chirac also said there is no question of the use of nuclear weapons in conflicts for military purposes. His position is supported by a significant section of the French elite (Schwarz 2006).
5. These thirteen principles include the following: entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), moratorium on nuclear weapons test explosions pending entry into force of the CTBT, negotiations of a Fissile Material Control Treaty, undertaking by the nuclear-weapons states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals as committed under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), strengthening of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and early entry into force of Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty–II (START II) and conclusion of START III, and a principle of irreversibility to apply to nuclear disarmament and to nuclear and other related arms control and reduction measures (NPT Review Conference 2000).
6. For more details on the 2005 NPT Conference, see Roche (2005).
7. A recent poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) found that in thirty-three of thirty-five countries surveyed, the majority of people responded that they believe the war in Iraq increased the likelihood of terrorist attacks around the world. PIPA Director Steven Kull stated, “The near unanimity of this assessment among countries is remarkable in global public opinion polling.” See “World Public Says Iraq War Has Increased Global Terrorist Threat,” at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/172.php?nid=&id=&pnt=172&lb=hpmpg1 (accessed April 28, 2006).

8. A recent poll finds that Iran has displaced the United States as the nation with the most countries giving it a negative rating. However, the poll shows that the United States has lost ground in some key allied countries. See “Global Poll Finds Iran Viewed Negatively: The U.S. Continues to Get Low Marks,” at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/168.php?nid=&id=&pnt=168&lb=hpmpg1 (accessed April 28, 2006).

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