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The Global Nuclear Threat

A tale of two countries: “rogue nations” developing nuclear capabilities

The global community has always faced threats of war and terrorism, but the recent testing of a nuclear bomb in North Korea has caused serious alarm in nearly every corner of the world. The development of nuclear weapons by “rogue nations” elevates the threat of a global catastrophe to a very dangerous level. The fact that North Korea has developed a nuclear bomb is frightening enough, but perhaps even more terrifying is North Korea’s declaration that any American pressure on the North Korean government would be regarded as an act of war.

Shortly after the nuclear blast was reported, Iran blamed the United States for provoking North Korea’s nuclear testing ambitions. At the same time, Iran vowed to keep developing its own questionable atomic development program and was noticeably in the small minority of nations who did not criticize North Korea’s nuclear testing. Now the United Nations Security Council must struggle to engage both Iran and North Korea in negotiations to stop their nuclear programs, and prevent a nuclear weapons race from spiraling out of control. Nuclear capability in the hands of irresponsible, undemocratic regimes is a world problem.

The global threat: Iran and North Korea

North Korea claimed to have tested its first nuclear device on October 9, 2006. North Korea has become the eighth confirmed nation to have overtly tested a nuclear weapon, joining the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India and Pakistan. Radioactive evidence has since surfaced to confirm plutonium was an ingredient in the bomb. On October 17, 2006, United States satellites detected suspicious vehicles and activities in the vicinity of the test area revealing the possibility of a second test. To date there is much conjecture as to whether the initial test was a success. Most nuclear tests are in the range of 5 kilotons to 20 kilotons of force, while recent reports indicate this North Korean detonation was closer to 0.25 kilotons, yielding the equivalent of 250 tons of TNT. While this is an enormous explosion, it is still small in comparison to most nuclear tests.

This test has immediate implications for the global war on terror. First, in view of the above information regarding North Korea, the Iranian program may be more advanced than previously believed. Second, a history of North Korean cooperation with Iran provides even more reason for concern.

Iran likely has at its disposal the same technology and blueprints that North Korea possesses. Pakistan nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan has admitted to supplying nuclear technology to North Korea, Iran and Libya on the black market. Pakistani smugglers reportedly sold nuclear weapon designs to Libya, and it is believed that these designs were originally supplied by China during the 1980s. In regards to this scenario, former United States Arms Inspector David Albright said, “you almost have to conclude the Chinese design went to Iran and North Korea.” Evidence points to close cooperation between North Korea and Iran. North Korea reportedly sold 18 disassembled BM-25 missiles to Iran, which Iran received in late April 2006. Both nations allegedly are cooperating on the development of long-range ballistic missiles. Compiled intelligence indicates Iranian representatives were present when North Korea test fired seven ballistic missiles in Japan’s direction on July 5, 2006.

The exact size and magnitude of the most recent detonated device remain unknown, and it is unclear whether such a device could be weaponized. Nonetheless, the benefits to Pyongyang of confirmed nuclear capability are numerous. The country gains increased military deterrence, greater international attention and a reaffirmation of the self-sufficiency philosophy that is the justification for the regime of Kim Jong-il, North Korea’s current leader. In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and in 2005 the country declared itself a nuclear power. The recent nuclear test follows a failed test of

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the country’s prototype intercontinental ballistic missile, the Taepo Dong-2, in July 2006. Obviously the war on terror suffered a setback in regard to this nuclear test, and the risk of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and materials falling into the hands of terrorists has increased. North Korea has a history of support for terrorist groups. During the 1990s, North Korea distributed counterfeit hundred-dollar bills through a European terrorist group.

Iran is the other half of this dangerous equation. The government of Iran has a rich history of support for and involvement with terrorist groups. In 1979, Iranian students seized the United States Embassy in Tehran, holding 52 hostages for 444 days. Iranian officials ordered the seizure, and Iran’s leader at the time, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, publicly praised the students. Iranian authorities were involved in duplicitous diplomacy with the United States during the 1980s and again when Khomeini issued a declaration calling for the death of the author Salman Rushdie. Iran has continuously supported Hezbollah, an Islamic terrorist group that has carried out numerous terrorist attacks against U.S. targets abroad. For many years Hezbollah was synonymous with terror, suicide bombings and kidnappings. In 1983 militants, who later went on to join Hezbollah ranks, carried out a suicide bombing attack that killed 241 United States Marines in Beirut. This was followed by Hezbollah’s 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina. Over the last two decades, Hezbollah evolved into a movement with thousands of trained guerrillas. The movement also adopted the tactic of taking Western hostages through a number of free-

lance hostage taking cells. Iran continues to support this group with arms and money.

More recently, Iran has attempted to destabilize Afghanistan and Iraq where training has been rendered to Moktada al-Sadr’s militias. Meanwhile Hasan Kazema Qomi, previously Iran’s liaison to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, became Iran’s top diplomat in Baghdad. For more than a decade Iranian authorities hid the existence of a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy water plant at Khondab. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s tweaking of the West and his refusal to bow to pressure on the nuclear issue are widely popular in Iran. The acquisition of technology to produce a nuclear device or a dirty bomb threatens American cities, and a nuclear accident in Israel, Egypt or Saudi Arabia could cause an extraordinarily massive conflagration in the Middle East.

Enriched uranium is a key component for nuclear bombs, but it can also be used to fuel nuclear reactors that generate electricity. Iran maintains that the real goal of its uranium enrichment program is for energy purposes. However, this motive is extremely suspect, especially considering the vast reserves of oil Iran has at its disposal. Certainly this is not a country in desperate need of a new source of energy, and the U.S. and its allies have publicly questioned Iran’s true goals.

North Korea has successfully developed a range of ballistic missiles that can hit targets throughout Asia, as proved when they test-fired a missile over Japan. Western intelligence strongly suggests that North Korea has sent technology and even technicians to Iran, enabling the development of both the missile program and the nuclear program of the Iranian government. So progress for North Korea’s nuclear program, like its recent

bomb test, may also mean progress for Iran's nuclear program. Regardless of this connection, by conducting the nuclear test in the face of near-universal opposition, North Korea's action may encourage and embolden Iran in its own nuclear endeavors. Experts also have evidence that Iran's Shahab-3 missile, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, is based on a North Korean rocket. In general, Iran has refused to comment on its close relationship with North Korea.

Nuclear proliferation has long been a concern for the U.N. Security Council, and North Korea's recent nuclear test may encourage other nations to develop nuclear capabilities. In addition to Iran, many countries may accelerate nuclear development, even if only for defense. Japan and South Korea both have a serious motivation to defend themselves from any potential aggression by their neighbor North Korea. Countries in the Middle East are also likely to attempt to strengthen their nuclear programs to protect against any reverberating consequences of Iran's potential nuclear strength.

The potential for nuclear war is as real today as it was during the Cold War, and in some ways the threat is greater now. In the Cold War, the concept of mutually guaranteed destruction, where the understanding that any nuclear attack would result in the attacker's own instant annihilation, meant that even the most committed members on both sides of the War refrained from direct confrontation. But with the North Korea threat, reason and logic may not necessarily prevail. The public statements and actions of Kim Jong-il indicate his suspicion of the rest of the world, and he has already declared that any pressures to change North Korea's nuclear activities will be regarded as declarations of war.

Effects of Nuclear Attacks

The destructive power of today's nuclear weapons is far greater than the weapons used by the U.S. during World War II. The use of nuclear weapons

today could have devastating consequences for humanity and the environment, not only in the country attacked but in neutral countries and the attacking country as well.

Even the effects of a relatively crude, small nuclear bomb would be disastrous. Realistically, a terrorist could use a small nuclear bomb, perhaps one kiloton in force, to level an area equivalent to most of the island of Manhattan. Such a weapon could simultaneously destroy the United Nations headquarters, the major television networks, the New York Stock Exchange, major banking centers, and vital transportation hubs. The ensuing chaos would have a ripple effect throughout the country.

While the U.S. is keenly aware of the overall threat of nuclear bombs, the danger from terrorists has been seriously overlooked. Large quantities of nuclear bomb-making material are within reach for hostile nations and terrorists, but only one-tenth of one percent of our military budget is devoted to protecting against the potential danger of terrorists equipped with nuclear bombs.

Governments tend to have much greater resources, and therefore more powerful nuclear capabilities, and North Korea is no exception. The radioactive fallout from one nuclear explosion can cover a wide area and remain for an extended period of time. Nuclear weapons could not have been used in the Persian Gulf War without poisonous radiation destroying Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the same countries that the U.S. was fighting to protect. A standard nuclear warhead on U.S. or British submarines has about 100 kilotons of force, 100 times more powerful than the terrorist bomb example. A nuclear attack of this magnitude on U.S. soil would have unimaginable consequences, but a similar attack elsewhere in the world would be extremely disruptive, at the very least.

An attack of this size would seriously destabilize the economy. For instance, if nuclear fallout were to land in the oil-rich areas near Iran

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in the Middle East, production of oil may stop. Even if production did not stop, vast amounts of the world's oil supply would be radioactive and therefore unusable. Some nuclear explosions produce an electromagnetic pulse (EMP), which can travel at the speed of light across a wide area. An EMP from a nuclear blast would disrupt a wide range of electronic operations, including banking and business records, the Internet, communications and airplane functions, all contributing to economic and social chaos.

In addition to serious economic problems, the environmental pollution from a nuclear bomb would have similar widespread ramifications. Employees could become critically ill, and business supplies and resources may be irreparably contaminated and in short supply.

Today even this scenario of one nuclear bomb seems outdated. The world is now home to multiple countries with nuclear power, and more are actively developing nuclear capabilities. If one nation attacked another with a single nuclear bomb, the victim of the attack would almost certainly retaliate, and other nations would probably follow suit. In all likelihood one nuclear attack would set off a chain reaction of subsequent attacks. The deployment of multiple nuclear warheads has the potential to instigate a nuclear winter, darkening and chilling the earth, which would seriously reduce world food crops. There is evidence that nuclear explosions in the earth's crust affect geological activity, with the potential to increase the amount of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Only a small proportion of the world's current nuclear destructive power is needed for this scenario to become a reality. Even if all these events materialized in their least harmful form, the effects of nuclear bombs are so powerful that the consequences would severely disrupt the global society. The smallest nuclear accident is still an extraordinary catastrophe.

The Time for Urgency is Now®

Although the United States has invested a great deal in anti-ballistic missile defenses and the Patriot Weapons System has been successfully deployed, there is no assurance of preventing a nuclear attack on our soil. However, businesses and organizations can minimize the consequences of nuclear bomb development by rogue nations. They can remain vigilant of these significant world events and establish contingency plans to protect themselves and their assets in the event of nuclear strikes. Even nuclear exchanges between other nations would have dire economic, ecological and social ramifications for the United States and the world. Such nuclear warfare would, at the very least, disrupt business and the global economy, displacing workers and inhibiting supply chains.

In the recent past, nuclear war seemed a distant, nearly imaginary threat. The United States and the Soviet Union were to some extent responsible adversaries and the Cold War adage of “mutual assured destruction” and prudent diplomacy diminished the threat of a nuclear conflagration. Now the players are less responsible, more volatile and exhibit a wide spectrum of seemingly non-negotiable differences. This is a new chapter in the history of nuclear weapons development and the earlier fail safe methods of deterrence are no longer relevant. Now more nations are developing nuclear technology, there is a necessity for a new focus and urgency because the threat of nuclear war is very real and very dangerous.



The Lipman Report Editors