

Preventing Nuclear Terrorism: A Global Intelligence Imperative

Apr 30, 2009



Brief Analysis

As Mohamed ElBaradei's term as head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) draws to a close, the organization is struggling to choose a new leader. After deadlocking on an initial vote in March, a new round of nominations closed on April 27, with the next vote scheduled in the coming months. While the IAEA sorts out changes at the top, the United States should try to expand the agency's mandate and responsibilities. One such change would be the establishment of a full-fledged intelligence office, which would dramatically improve the agency's ability to identify and deter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Post-September 11 Urgency

After the September 11 attacks, the CIA faced the daunting prospect of al-Qaeda seeking a nuclear bomb and collaborating with Pakistani nuclear scientists in an effort to build one. A mood of grim determination gripped the U.S. intelligence establishment, a sentiment highlighted by CIA Director George Tenet when he stated that "We are behind the eight ball" in tracking al-Qaeda's efforts to obtain WMDs.

This threat galvanized an unprecedented response, which stimulated a degree of risk taking, experimentation, and creativity that would have been impossible under normal circumstances. U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies abandoned traditional methods of conducting business and worked together in unprecedented ways to defuse the threat. Government agencies agreed to colocate officers and work together as an integrated team, drawing from a well of capabilities that included everything at the U.S. government's disposal. The United States also shared raw leads and information with dozens of countries in the war on terrorism, most notably with our new Russian partners. Washington went to extreme lengths to ensure information was passed to anyone who might have answers, including Syria, Sudan, and Iran. Conventional rules limiting the sharing of information were suspended in favor of sharing everything with everyone. In all, the CIA passed WMD-related leads and analysis to over two dozen countries. In fact, in the process of averting a WMD-enabled al-Qaeda, the United States and its allies were able to thwart attacks in the formative stages in several countries.

The Price of Success

Over time, the shared feeling of imminent threat began to dissipate, and as it did, U.S. interagency cooperation and international outreach reverted to more traditional, limited form. Cooperation once again became more formal, rigid, and slower. Unfortunately, the threat of an al-Qaeda-linked nuclear attack has not diminished, even as memories of its aborted attempts fade.

Nuclear threats are growing, and nuclear terrorism is among the greatest challenges facing the world in the age of globalization. Terrorist groups are attempting to procure WMDs in order to achieve global objectives. For terrorists, possessing even a single nuclear weapon would place them at the pinnacle of power, knowing that detonating a bomb in any city offers an opportunity to change history. Although it would not be easy for any state or terrorist group to pull off such an attack, even the minute chance that terrorists might have that ability changes the equation

dramatically, given that the Cold War concept of mutually assured destruction is no longer applicable.

The Armageddon Test

What makes the situation more dangerous is the availability of weapons-usable material on the black market -- material that is often not reported as missing from or unaccounted for at the facility of origin. Seizures have typically been samples of larger quantities that remain missing. Furthermore, the record indicates that nuclear material seizures have been serendipitous, and not the result of proactive intelligence and law enforcement action. Past smuggling incidents have fostered deep suspicion and mistrust among states, including charges and countercharges over sting operations.

Intelligence and law enforcement organizations have not taken ownership of loose nuclear material. This should come as no surprise given the reluctance of nuclear states to acknowledge that material is missing or that they have secretly provided it to other governments or nonstate actors. States are loath to claim missing material when it is seized and much less ready to accept the possibility that more may be missing and for sale to the highest bidder. To make matters worse, nothing is more sensitive to governments than sharing information about nuclear secrets, weapons, and materiel, and there is a natural aversion to working with rival countries. As such, national interests trump the collective security imperative of closing down the nuclear black market.

An IAEA with Teeth

The overall U.S. effort to prevent a nuclear terrorist attack depends heavily on the ability of intelligence to perform its mission. Broadening the mandate and intelligence capability of the IAEA -- a multilateral institution created specifically to respond to nuclear threats -- would be one way to improve international intelligence capability in this area. IAEA intelligence would not require an army, only a small core of true professionals. To build such an effort, intelligence officers could be seconded to the IAEA. A small operational team, following carefully conceived ground rules, could penetrate and study the black market, and devise a plan to eliminate it. To demonstrate the gravity of the problem, the group could be tasked to obtain sufficient nuclear material for a bomb. The successful completion of such a task might help highlight the dangers and galvanize the international community to act.

Nothing is substantively complicated about arming the IAEA with intelligence capacity. Considering the nuclear mission of the agency and its status as an established international body, it is only logical to do so. The IAEA needs all three parts of the intelligence cycle -- requirements, collection, and analysis -- in order to effectively carry out its mission. Applying the discipline and rigor of intelligence collection and analytical tradecraft in tracking nuclear materials, analyzing smuggling networks, and identifying clandestine nuclear activity would only enhance the IAEA's capacity to serve the common interests of all member states.

A Preventable Catastrophe

Objections to creating an IAEA intelligence capability will center around international politics and the bureaucratic realities of multilateralism, rather than on the substance of the matter. Some may argue that based on its track record, the IAEA is not worthy of such trust and responsibility. Others will express reluctance to infuse intelligence into the agency's sensitive safeguard mission. Certain intelligence officials will express concern about protection of sources and methods in sharing more information with the IAEA. Under the current system, IAEA employees, for example, cannot be prosecuted for leaking sensitive intelligence information. While these reservations have some merit, they should not be barriers to multilateralism, but rather serve as a basis for formulating a realistic plan for cooperation. The truth is that states cannot succeed on their own; global intelligence is the only hope for confronting nuclear terrorism and other threats to collective security.

The biggest obstacle to multilateral intelligence cooperation is leadership and finding the courage to work together. Group think and risk aversion must be overcome in the name of urgency. The IAEA must garner the support of

member states, their resources, methodologies, and most of all, their information. An aggressive international intelligence presence on the black market would help deter smugglers and terrorists. It would help prove that the international community, by working together, can eliminate the nuclear black market, deter nuclear smuggling, and expose clandestine nuclear activity before it reaches fruition. If the international community stays on the current course, however, it is only a matter of time before the world experiences the catastrophe of a nuclear terrorist attack.

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