

Looking for Threats in All the Wrong Places

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Joseph Cirincione
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

September 11 should change the way we assess threats to the United States. The two-front war now being waged in Central Asia and in airports and mailrooms across America will transform our defense and proliferation policies. How fast and how far the transformations will extend is still unknown. It depends a great deal on how honest we are about the mistakes we all made before the attacks.

Redefinitions.

The destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon should force a redefinition of what we mean by weapons of mass destruction. For decades, proliferation experts have concentrated on preventing the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. We focused on the weapons that our nations had created during the Cold War, fearing that others might build them as well. In addition to the technical and financial barriers to developing these horrific weapons, generations of leaders constructed legal, political and diplomatic barriers through the treaties and agreements of the international non-proliferation regime.

The bitter irony is that the regime worked. It made it very difficult—though not impossible—for anyone to acquire one of these weapons. Four decades after President John F. Kennedy feared that 15, 20, or 25 nations would soon have nuclear weapons, there are only eight nuclear-weapon states in the world. Decades after the United States and the Soviet Union perfected and proliferated enough chemical and biological weapons to wipe out all human life on the planet, global treaties have banned both types of weapons and destroyed large parts of the Cold War arsenals. There are holes in the treaty regime and a great deal of work still to be done. But now we are operating in an entirely new dimension.

The September 11 terrorists killed thousands not with chemical, biological or nuclear agents, but with aviation fuel. This terror came low-tech. They studied flight manuals not physics. Instead of building missiles, they stole what they needed and turned our own technological marvels against us. No one expected such an attack.

When the bioterrorism attack many had long-feared finally came, it, too, was not what experts had predicted. On October 9, someone sent anthrax-filled letters to Congress and the news media. They either did not understand the sophisticated dispersal mechanisms needed to cause mass casualties from anthrax, or they simply did not care. In this case, the attack was much less than had been feared. After all, the delivery mechanisms for biological weapons are

well known. At the time President Richard Nixon terminated the U.S. biological weapons program in 1969, the U.S. Army has successfully weaponized and stockpiled anthrax and other agents in hundreds of bombs, bomblets, spray tanks and assorted munitions.¹ These terrorists used envelopes. So far, the deaths have been few, but the fear and disruption have been significant.

How, then, are we to define the new dangers we face? The war could get worse. Just as the global audience watched the horror of September 11 unfold, with one terrible event followed by an even worse catastrophe, the scattered anthrax mailings may presage a more determined assault. If it is true, as some intelligence officials believe, that the anthrax attacks are the work of domestic extremists, not al Qaeda, then Osama Bin Laden's second act is still to come. As we try to anticipate and defend, the face of future warfare is revealed.

The most devastating of all possible weapons, a nuclear bomb, may be the least likely to be used. It is still possible, however, that a group could have stolen or bought nuclear materials or even a small, tactical nuclear weapon from the stockpile of thousands of such weapons still in Russia, or that Iraq may have constructed a crude device and provided it to the al Qaeda network. It could be smuggled in by boat, plane or truck. Presented with such a variety of simple yet effective methods of delivery, few seriously believe that such a bomb will come on the tip of a ballistic missile.

Nuclear weapons are also a danger if the war in Afghanistan destabilizes the government of Pakistan. The Pakistani army might lose control of one or more of the weapons Pakistan has constructed since its 1998 nuclear tests. Or some elements of the military could revolt, handing control of the weapons over to the Taliban or other radical forces.

There are also dangers from nuclear miscalculations or accidents in South Asia. India might be tempted to take advantage of tensions within Pakistan to try to resolve the Kashmir issue by force, triggering a Pakistan nuclear response. Or, as tensions rise in Kashmir, one or both sides might begin moving their mobile nuclear forces, increasing the chances of an accidental detonation.

Chemical or biological attacks on U.S. forces or on the American homeland are a real possibility. Easier (though still quite difficult) to make or obtain than nuclear weapons, terrorists could strike with potent agents and improved delivery mechanisms. Reports of terrorist interest in crop-dusting planes in ominous, but humans may not be the only targets. A pick-up truck driving through Kansas or South Dakota scattering wheat smut or similar agents could kill a substantial portion of the U.S. wheat or corn crop.

Attacks do not have to be catastrophic to cause serious disruption. Car or truck bombs at crowded malls could kill dozens, and deliver a body blow to the U.S. economy. These could be followed by additional attacks on critical buildings, plants and structures that could result in casualties as great as the WTC disaster.

This last issue is worthy of our most serious study. The collapse of the World Trade Center should teach us that our definition of weapons of mass destruction should be expanded to include conventional attacks on critical infrastructure that could cause mass casualties and mass disruptions. There are over 40,000 chemical plants in the United States. A saboteur could turn one of them into an American Bhopal -- the town in India where an accident at a Union Carbide

pesticide plant released a deadly gas cloud that killed 5,000. A trained nuclear engineer could set off a chain reaction at one of the nation's 103 nuclear power plants, or an airplane could target the plant, triggering a nuclear disaster far worse than Chernobyl or Three Mile Island. There are 9,300 "high hazard" dams whose collapse would cause human deaths. Fifty thousands trucks carrying hazardous materials travel on America's highways each day; a gasoline or chlorine gas truck exploded in a tunnel could kill hundreds. "E-terrorists" could attack some of the 24 government computer networks that the General Accounting Office recently found were inadequately protected, including those of the departments of defense and treasury. Or computer hackers could simply disable power grids, wrecking havoc in countless American cities.

These are not traditional proliferation problems, but they are now serious national security issues. They cannot be addressed through traditional diplomatic or military measures. By acknowledging that we have to change our definition of weapons of mass destruction to include what I would call "conventional weapons of mass destruction," we are forced to expand our definition of national security and change what we mean by national defense. This does not replace the existing proliferation problems (such as state acquisition of nuclear or biological weapons), it adds to them. This, in turn has serious implications for our national threat assessments and how we allocate our national defense resources.

Reassessment

A major reason why we were—and still are—so unprepared for the terrorist attacks is that our national threat assessments for the past few years have consistently pointed us in the wrong direction. Partisan political warfare over the past decade distorted U.S. intelligence and defense assessments and fundamentally misled and misdirected national security resources.²

The two best known threat assessments compiled before September 11 are undoubtedly those prepared by the two commissions chaired by Donald Rumsfeld. The first in 1998, *Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States*, warned that the United States faced an urgent threat of attack by ballistic missiles that could be fielded by a hostile state "with little or no warning." The second, in January 2001, *Report of the Commission to Assess United States National Security Space Management and Organization*, warned just as ominously that we risked a "Pearl Harbor" in space unless we immediately launched an expansive and expensive effort to deploy new generations of sensors, satellites and weapons in space. Together, the reports fortified the conservative national security vision and heavily influenced political debate, threat assessments and budgetary priorities over the past three years.

Accordingly, until September 11 the number one national security priority of the Administration had been the development and deployment of a national missile defense system. (This was also true of the last year of the Clinton administration.) At over \$8 billion per year, missile defense is by far the most expensive single weapons program in the defense budget. Senior officials and members of the cabinet made it their top agenda item in countless meetings with NATO allies, Russia and China. In just the few months before September 11, five cabinet members, including National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, traveled to Moscow solely for the purpose of persuading the Russian leadership to acquiesce to U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. As Maureen Dowd wrote in *The New York Times* on September 5,

"Why can George W. Bush think of nothing but a missile shield? Our president is caught in the grip of an obsession worthy of literature."³

It is fair to ask whether the September attacks could have been prevented if senior officials and summit meetings had addressed cooperative efforts to defend against terrorism rather than missiles. While reports on missile defense and space received overwhelming official and media response, similar reports and warnings about asymmetrical threats and domestic terrorism were largely ignored. Experts have warned of the dangers for years, particularly after the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center came close to collapsing the buildings with conventional truck bombs. The Commission on National Security/21st Century, chaired by former senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman warned March year that "the United States will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on the American home land, and U.S. military superiority will not entirely protect us." The commission members are now a hot item, but then they struggled for attention. Similarly in December 2001, the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Responses Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction released their second report. They warned, "a terrorists attack on some level inside our borders is inevitable and the United States must be ready."⁴ The commission specifically found an urgent need to "craft a truly 'national' strategy to address the threat of domestic terrorism—conventional, cyber, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear—from the perspective of deterrence, prevention, preparedness and response."⁵

Numerous expert reports have warned over the past ten years that a terrorist group might try to buy or steal nuclear materials -- warnings now eerily echoed in reports that al Qaeda operatives have tried to acquire uranium. Just this January, a special commission chaired by former senator Howard Baker and Lloyd Cutler urged the administration to triple the money spent on securing and eliminating Russia's nuclear weapons and materials. At a meeting of experts in Washington, D.C., Cutler emphasized that, "Our principal conclusions are that the most urgent unmet national security threat for the United States today is the danger that weapons of mass destruction or weapons-usable material in Russia could be stolen and sold to terrorists or hostile nation-states, and used against American troops abroad, or citizens at home."⁶

These concerns were noted in some official threat assessments. This February, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency Admiral Thomas Wilson told Congress that over the next 12 to 24 months, he feared "a major terrorist attack against United States interests, either here or abroad, perhaps with a weapon designed to produce mass casualties."⁷ But the prediction was lost in a long list of other concerns.

These clashing threat assessments often provoked debate between Democrats in the Congress and the Republican administration. Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Carl Levin stated in one such exchange:

"I'm also concerned that we may not be putting enough emphasis on countering the most likely threats to our national security and to the security of our forces deployed around the world, those asymmetric threats, like terrorist attacks on the USS Cole, on our barracks and our embassies around the world, on the World Trade Center, including

possible attacks with weapons of mass destruction and cyberthreats to our national security establishment and even to our economic infrastructure.”⁸

Administration officials would defend their assessments and budget priorities, arguing that the government was addressing all threats -- terrorism and missile defense. But it was clear where the priority lay. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued:

“But when I think about it, what is different about the two [terrorism and missile defense] is, number one, we have some capability against the terrorist threat today....We have no ability to protect ourselves against ballistic missiles. And secondly, and this is the reason we have no ability -- or part of the reason we have no ability to protect against ballistic missiles, we have a treaty prohibiting us from doing so.”⁹

The day before the attacks, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Joseph Biden prophetically warned of an exclusive focus on missile defenses in a speech at the National Press Club. He cited the Joint Chiefs support of his view that a strategic nuclear attack “is less likely than regional conflicts, or major theater wars or terrorist attacks at home and abroad.” If we spend billions on missile defense, he feared, “We will have diverted all that money to address the least likely threat while the real threats come into this country in the hold of ship, or the belly of a plane or are smuggled into a city in the middle of the night in a vial in a backpack.” Sadly, he can now add, “in a kamikaze attack.”

Reorientation

Over the past decade there have been repeated efforts to redefine national security to include, for example, global warming as a national security threat. These efforts chewed up pages of journal articles but never made a dent in national security budgets. This will be different. Now the redefinition is happening on the ground, in events that are affecting millions.

One measure of change is to realize that since September 11 hundreds of men and women in uniform have died. They did not wear military uniforms, however, but the uniforms of fire departments, police departments, and the postal service. The front lines of this conflict have moved, or more precisely, there are two front lines – Afghanistan and America. It is not at all clear that the greater effort is the one coordinated by the Pentagon. The president quickly recognized this new reality and created the Office of Homeland Security to coordinate the domestic battle. With former governor Tom Ridge now in charge, it is likely that this office will grow in stature and authority over the coming year. Americans support the military strikes in Afghanistan, but they are much more vitally and personally engaged in the defense of their homes, offices and airports.

Health has become a national security issue. The government briefings on spores and antibiotics are followed even more avidly than the briefings on targets and strike aircraft. This is not a momentary phenomenon. The country has now developed the collective desire and demand to prepare for future bioterrorism attacks. Nor is this a trivial undertaking; it will require billions of dollars in new federal expenditures. The initial budget skirmishes are already

beginning. President Bush has sent Congress a bill that would provide millions to stockpile vaccines against anthrax and smallpox, but nothing to improve the health service infrastructure. Senate Democrats are insisting that the government provide aid to the clinics and hospitals that are the first line of defense against infectious disease. They want money for new staff, new training and new detection equipment. Democratic initiatives will likely succeed as the popular acronym "ER" becomes widely identified with "Emergency Response."

The government will also face new demands to protect critical infrastructure such as dams, plants and airports. This will cost billions more and possibly create entirely new federal services, (to improve airport security, for example). Where will the money come from? Do these new line items appear in the budgets of the departments of defense, justice or interior? While we struggle to answer these new questions, there are already some clear directions for policy that can draw on the decades of experiences gathered in global efforts to constrain the spread of the traditional weapons of mass destruction.

The first line of defense must be to reduce and prevent the threats at the source. For the chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, existing treaties and organizations are well-suited for the job and now need to be strengthened.

The President should immediately implement the recommendations of the Baker-Cutler report to accelerate the elimination and securing of Russian nuclear weapons and materials. The country needs, in the words of the report, "an enhanced response proportional to the threat." The largest obstacle for any nation or group wanting to build a nuclear bomb is acquiring the 25 kilograms of highly enriched uranium or eight kilograms of plutonium necessary for the weapon's core. There are over one thousands tons of such fissile material in Russia, much of it inadequately guarded. Under current efforts, it will take 60 years to secure all Russian nuclear materials. The Baker-Cutler commission recommends that the United States "secure and/or neutralize in the next eight to ten years all nuclear-weapons usable material located in Russia and prevent the outflow from Russia of scientific expertise that could be used for nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction."¹⁰ Clearly, current programs must be bolstered and accelerated. Similarly, now is the time to reduce drastically the number of deployed nuclear weapons in both Russian and U.S. arsenals. The fewer weapons that exist, the smaller are the nuclear weapons production and replacement stocks required, the lower the chances of theft or diversion of materials or weapons, and the greater the leverage on other nuclear-weapon states to reduce their arsenals.

We need the ability to inspect other nations for the presence of weapons outlawed under international law. Unfortunately, the administration rejected a verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention earlier this year that would have provided for rigorous international inspections of suspected biological weapons facilities. Reconsideration of the Administration's position, or proposals for a tougher inspection regime are now in order. With the current high level of anxiety, negotiations that might take years under normal circumstances may be adopted within months, if the United States puts its formidable diplomatic muscle behind them.

We must also reduce the vulnerabilities of critical infrastructures. “The whole world has been turned upside down” by the September 11 attacks, says Richard Meserve, chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which oversees commercial security measures for nuclear-power plants. “We have to re-examine our entire capability to withstand a terrorist attack.”¹¹ Corbin McNeill Jr., the chairman of Exelon Corp., says we should bury all future plants. “There should be no vital components above ground,” he says.¹² It may also mean that we should not build them at all. We will face similar decisions on how or whether we should build other new facilities such as skyscrapers, dams and chemical plants. All must now be evaluated in terms of minimizing vulnerabilities, not just costs.

Critical to preventing future terrorist attacks will be expanding and institutionalizing the exchange of information among the intelligence services of key countries (and, some would say, amongst our own various national agencies). The United States is gathering information now from countries whose cooperation would have been unthinkable a few months ago, including Iran and possibly Libya. Exchanges extend beyond military and intelligence collaboration. The war on terrorism is in large part fought not by traditional military means but by agencies that fall under the purview of nations’ interior ministries: domestic law enforcement, customs, treasury, immigration and investigative agencies. This cooperation requires the careful maintenance of the unprecedented international coalition against terrorism that President Bush has constructed.

Efforts to prevent and reduce the threats, however, will not completely succeed. We must be ready to respond to future attacks. This will require capable military forces and a strategy suited to the new face of warfare, not that of past wars. Military forces and the willingness to use them will serve as a deterrent to any nation with weapons of mass destruction, but will not deter sub-national terrorist groups unconcerned with national survival. When the time comes – as it has now—to use our military, we must have the right weapons for the job. Secretary of the Air Force James Roche struck the right chord (and undoubtedly disappointed many of his former colleagues at Northrop Grumman) when he said buying more B-2 bombers would be a serious mistake. Though these planes are featured extensively in media footage of the airstrikes on Afghanistan, they must fly over two days to drop bombs that can be more efficiently delivered by other, closer aircraft. Roche said, “I have yet to find a general who says we need more B-2s.”¹³ He called instead for fast, mobile mini-bombers that can hit moving targets and upgrades of the sensors and data networks that link aircraft.

Response is much more than a military matter. The anthrax envelopes are a wake-up call to the dangers of a serious bioterrorist event. A public health infrastructure that can detect and respond to attacks, treating the injured and containing a disease before it can become an epidemic, is one part of a broader “first response.” The third report of the Hart-Rudman Commission concludes:

“Managing the consequences of a catastrophic attack on the U.S. homeland would be a complex and difficult process. The first priority should be to build up and augment state and local response capabilities. Adequate equipment must be available to first responders in local communities. Procedures and guidelines need to be defined and disseminated and then practiced through simulations and exercises.”¹⁴

Reorienting our national security and proliferation policies requires us to take homeland defense seriously. The commission members point out that prevention and protection come first, that “U.S. foreign policy should strive to shape an international system in which just grievances can be addressed without violence,” and that “verifiable arms control and nonproliferation efforts must remain a top priority.” They conclude however, that the U.S. government is not well organized for homeland security. The Hart-Rudman report serves as an excellent guideline for concrete steps necessary to reorient and reorganize the government.

Conclusion

This should be a moment when experts and political leaders forge a common cause - to compromise individual agendas for the sake of a unified response to those who attack this country. It should be possible to pursue missile defense research, while redirecting defense funds to airport security, emergency management and counter-intelligence operations. We can carefully monitor rogue nations, but focus now on the few, small groups of transnational terrorists. We can update treaties where necessary, but still reinforce international alliances to isolate those who operate beyond the pale. We can pursue and punish those responsible, while engaging in efforts to resolve the underlying conflicts and conditions that breed terrorism. Redefine; reassess; reorient. This time, we should take the warnings seriously.

Joseph Cirincione is Director of the Non-Proliferation Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of *Deadly Arsenals: Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Carnegie Endowment: Washington, D.C., 2002). This presentation is adapted from an article by the author, “Defending America,” in the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Winter/Spring 2002.

¹ The weapon thought most likely to be used was the E133 cluster bomb, holding 536 biological bomblets, each containing 35 milliliters of a liquid suspension of anthrax spores. A small explosive charge would, upon impact, turn the liquid into aerosol to be inhaled by the intended victims. At the time the program was dismantled, the United States held in storage some 40,000 liters of anti-personnel biological warfare agents and some 5,000 kilograms of anti-agriculture agents. All were destroyed. The Soviet Union had a similar, if not larger, program. Former first deputy director of Biopreparat Kenneth Alibek testified before the U.S. Senate that the Soviet program employed over 60,000 people and stockpiled hundreds of anthrax weapon formulation and dozens of tons of smallpox and plague (http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1998_hr/alibek.htm).

² See, J. Cirincione, "Making Sense of Missile Defense," Foreign Service Journal, November 2000, available at: www.ceip.org/npp.

³ M. Dowd, "His Magnificent Obsession," *The New York Times September 5, 2001, p. A23.*

⁴ Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Responses Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, *Second Annual Report: Toward a National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, (Washington D.C., Rand Corporation). Available at: <http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/pdf/wmdterror2.pdf>.

⁵ ibid.

⁶ L. Cutler, "The Greatest Unmet National Security Threat," Proliferation Brief, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 30, 2000 (Washington, DC; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). Available at : www.ceip.org/npp.

⁷ Vice Admiral Thomas R. Wilson, Defense Intelligence Agency, before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 7 February 2001.

⁸ Senator Carl Levin, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee: Defense Strategy Review, with Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton , Washington, DC, June 21, 2001.

⁹ Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee: Missile Defense, July 17, 2001. For Fiscal Year 2002, the federal government budgeted \$1.7 billion to combat weapons of mass destruction terrorism, as part of a \$9.7 billion budget for anti-terrorism efforts overall.

¹⁰ H. Baker, L. Cutler and U.S. Secretary of energy Advisory Board, "A Report Card on the Department of Energy's Nonproliferation Programs with Russia," (Washington, D.C., Department of Energy) January 2001, p. 2. Available at <http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/pdf/DOERussiaTaskForceReport011001.pdf>.

¹¹ "Suddenly, Small Gaps in Nuclear Security Look Like Chasms," Wall Street Journal, October 17, 2001, p. 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ G. Schneider, "Air Force Chief Opposes Purchase of More B-2s," *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2001, p. E1.

¹⁴ U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change*, (Washington, D.C.) March 2001. Available at: <http://www.mipt.org/srchnatlstrat03272001c.html>.