

Nuclear Terrorism Prevention is Imperative

By Stanislav Ivanov

Nuclear technologies proliferation and the increasing threat that these technologies could be used by dictatorial regimes and forces of international terrorism add urgency to the goal of protecting the international community from pending nuclear catastrophe. Great powers and international organizations have begun to address the need to develop active and preventive measures to reduce nuclear arsenals, counter nuclear weapons proliferation and technologies, and prevent nuclear terrorism. Russia has not shied away from these processes. Any manifestation of terrorism, including nuclear terrorism, is classified in Russia as a grave crime that inflicts damage to the state and public security.

The terrorism phenomenon is rooted in unresolved domestic and regional conflicts, including political, socio-economic, territorial, national, ethnic, religious, and other conflicts, which sometimes escalate into local wars and may include terrorism as a form of combat. Terrorism can also emerge as a method of countering great powers in their efforts to expand their influence across the globe and impose their models of behavior on nations whose forms of government, society, and lifestyle differ from western models. As consequence of such attempted imposition, extremist organizations and secret or semi-secret societies can emerge, including pseudo-religious, pseudo-patriotic, nationalistic organizations and sects. Leaders of these organizations develop their own teachings—which they insist are the “only true” teachings—on how to save their nation or dramatically improve their compatriots’ lives in an attempt to recruit as many followers as possible.

We have observed recent attempts to attribute the new global wave of violence, extremism, and terrorism to the clash of western and eastern (or Christian and Islamic) civilizations. Such an explanation is not scientific, albeit terrorists of all nationalities exploit the increasing antagonisms of the contemporary global order.

One important aspect of the ongoing expansion of terrorism is this process has transcended borders and become international. As a rule, a terrorist organization establishes a single system of command and control, financing, logistical support, and combat operations. It also establishes a network of secret bases across the globe. However, terrorists sometimes avoid vertical hierarchies in order to lower risk of disruption and act in separate cells that are united by a single goal, as is the case with al Qaeda.

Terrorism has become one of the most dangerous threats to humankind in terms of its scale, unpredictability, and consequences. The possibility that terrorists will use a weapon of mass destruction, foremost nuclear or radioactive materials, is especially dangerous. In my opinion, nuclear terrorism should be defined as the aggregate of criminal actions associated with forceful seizure, theft, illegal acquisition, transfer, and use of nuclear and other radioactive materials with intent to cause maximum damage to the population, economy, and environment with the purpose of intimidation and exercising of pressure on the society and government bodies. The broad understanding of this phenomenon would imply access of terrorists to any nuclear and radioactive materials and technologies, while the narrow one would imply direct access to warheads. It is widely believed that the threat of nuclear terrorism is factitious and that it poses no real danger to the world. Indeed, so far terrorists have not detonated a nuclear device anywhere in the world. (I can only recall that a rebellious French general Moris Chalet made an unsuccessful attempt to seize a nuclear test ground in Algiers). At best, terrorists would succeed today in acquiring a small quantity of radioactive materials to build a so-called dirty bomb. However, terrorists have already made attempts to not only gain access to nuclear materials, but also to use them. For example, Chechen terrorists secretly planted a container with cesium in a Moscow park in 1995. Quests for nuclear materials by international terrorist organization like al Qaeda and Japanese occult sect Aum Shinryko have been documented. A number of blueprints for building a nuclear bomb, including diagrams and briefing notes, have been found during a counterterrorist operation in Kabul. While in custody, accomplices of Osama bin Laden have testified that he is consistently striving for acquisition of either nuclear

weapons or radioactive materials. Radioactive polonium was used to kill Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko in London.

Terrorists of all stripes and their secret accomplices have been displaying increased interest in nuclear facilities and research and development centers for a long time. Concerns over storage, accounting, and transportation of nuclear weapons and radioactive materials are growing every year. These concerns are rooted in the fact that non-state actors, including terrorists, have acquired the ability to obtain nuclear technology, material, and information (via cyberspace). These capabilities pose real threats to the international security.

The world's combined stockpile of nuclear weapons exceeds 27,000 units, including 12,000 deployed weapons. Russia, the United States, Great Britain, France, and China have accumulated enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons, while Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea have mastered the technology of producing such weapons. Countries such as Algiers, Egypt, South Africa, Morocco, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, and other Persian Gulf states have announced plans to develop nuclear energy industry.

The aforementioned trends underscore the need to heighten nuclear security standards across the globe, to detect and neutralize terrorist groups which are aspiring to acquire nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Standards for material protection, control, and accounting of radioactive materials need to be more robust as should be measures to prevent smuggling of these materials.

The threat of nuclear terrorism compels both countries and international organizations, including the United Nations, Interpol, and others, to cooperate in countering it. It is the UN and its main bodies, such as the General Assembly, Security Council, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), that play the central role in coordinating these effort along with various multilateral informal partnerships. The past few years have seen the UN and its agencies adopt a number of international legal documents that address nuclear terrorism prevention

The General Assembly of the United Nations passed the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism in April 2005, which became the main document in ensuring

nuclear security in the world. The convention was opened for signature in September 2005 and became effective on July 7, 2007. The Russian Federation uninitiated drafting of this convention by the United Nations. It became the first universal document aimed at the prevention of nuclear terrorism and the first international counterterrorism agreement adopted to prevent an event that had never occurred—namely a terrorist attack with use of nuclear materials or radioactive substances—rather than to react to it. The goal is to lay an effective legal foundation of international cooperation, including interdiction and management of consequences, implementation of protection measures, including protection of civilian and military nuclear facilities.

One important quality of this convention is it requires all states to define nuclear terrorism as a crime in their national laws and obliges them to cooperate among themselves in prevention and investigation of nuclear terrorist attacks and in prosecution of terrorists. This document does not only combat terrorism, but also facilitates strengthening of the global regime of nuclear non-proliferation.

The convention focuses on prevention of use of radioactive materials in terrorist attacks. The document contains a detailed list of actions (by individuals or groups) it defines as criminal. Of special importance are those provisions that ensure punishment for this crime is unavoidable by codifying the principle of “aut dedere aut judicare” (Latin for "extradite or prosecute"). This principle requires any state the suspect is in to either try him or extradite him to be tried in another state. The convention requires signatories to render maximum assistance to each other in investigating, prosecuting, and extraditing individuals charged with nuclear terrorism, including assistance in collecting evidence needed for investigation. Since the convention entered into force, prevention and interdiction of acts of nuclear terrorism are no longer a domestic political issue for signatories.

One hundred and fifteen nations had signed the convention and 22 ratified it by July 2007. Having filled the legal vacuum in such a sensitive domain of international security, the convention laid a legal foundation for successful international efforts to prevent and liquidate nuclear terrorism. At the same time, the international legal and procedural basis for combating nuclear terrorism is still being formed. In this respect I should note that I believe the aforementioned convention’s purpose and

mission would be reflected if this document were named “International Convention on Preventing and Liquidating Nuclear Terrorism and on Combating Nuclear Terrorism.” Such a name would demonstrate fully and precisely the logic behind this convention. It would also demonstrate that this convention is aimed at not only preventing individual acts of nuclear terrorism and managing consequences of such acts, but also at uprooting this menace.

The international community is yet to fully recognize the threat of nuclear terrorism. Lack of interest in ratifying the convention proves the threat is underestimated. Fewer than 30 states, which account for only 15 percent of UN members, had ratified the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism in the 32 months since the document was opened for signature. It seems the general recognition of the nuclear terrorism threat is yet to transform into awareness by individual countries that this threat directly affects their national security as it affects international security.

In 2006 Russia and the United States introduced the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT). This initiative has become an effective instrument for advancing international security. Seventy-six countries and four international organizations are currently participating in GICNT. A GICNT summit took place in Washington, D.C. in April 2010, and organizers invited 45 heads of state and international organizations such as the IAEA, to participate in President Barack Obama’s Nuclear Security Summit. The participants discussed ways of strengthening nuclear security, preventing nuclear terrorism, and developing concrete measures to ensure secure storage and transportation of nuclear materials. The summit’s importance was underscored by the fact that the presidents of Russia and the United States signed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty three days prior. This treaty provides for significant cuts in the nuclear arsenals of both countries.

During the Summit’s plenary session, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced Russia’s decision to shut down the country’s last Russian plutonium production reactor in the Krasnoyarski Krai city of Zheleznogorsk by 2011. At the end of the summit all participants adopted a joint communiqué in which they declared their commitment to “strengthen nuclear security and reduce the

threat of nuclear terrorism.” The communiqué also noted “success will require responsible national actions and sustained and effective international cooperation,” as well as to reaffirm “the essential role of the International Atomic Energy Agency in the international nuclear security framework.” Summit participants also adopted a plan of action for strengthening physical nuclear security, which included a range of measures aimed at enhancing international oversight over the most “sensitive” phases of the closed nuclear fuel cycle: enrichment of uranium and separation of plutonium from spent nuclear fuel. In that respect the agenda of the Washington summit was far from revolutionary. The summit contributed to strengthening trust among nuclear powers and developing unified international standards for protection of nuclear facilities, which were first proposed during the G-8 summit in Moscow in April 1996. The Washington summit paid special attention to security systems at fissile material storage facilities.

I should note that all participants of the April 2010 summit shared understanding of the nuclear terrorism threat, but the Russian Federation and United States maintain different approaches toward the prevention of nuclear terrorism. Russia’s approach focuses on strengthening international standards for protection of nuclear facilities, including fissile material (FM) storage facilities. The United States advocates incremental internationalization of the closed nuclear fuel cycle with subsequent deep reformation of the IAEA. In 2004 the George W. Bush administration asserted the international community needs to craft an international code of behavior for the nuclear energy industry. Such a code would include a comprehensive ban on use of highly-enriched uranium and weapons-grade plutonium. Washington also suggested that transfer of nuclear technologies to those countries—that had not mastered closed nuclear fuel cycle by January 1, 2004—be banned. The U.S. government also called for strengthening the role of the World Nuclear Association, which unites the largest suppliers of uranium. This organization represents an informal association of leading uranium-mining companies even though its structure mirrors that of the IAEA. The current initiatives of the Obama administration follow suit set by its predecessor. The United States government has reaffirmed its interest in elimination of weapons-grade plutonium by signing the Plutonium Disposition Protocol to

the 2000 framework agreement on cooperation in disposition of weapons-grade plutonium with Russia. The accord provides for disposition of some 34,000 tons of weapons-grade plutonium that would be extracted in the course of implementation of the START-III treaty. The United States has also proposed establishment of international centers for production of nuclear fuel, which requires serious modification of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This treaty entitles all states to peaceful use of nuclear energy under the IAEA's safeguards.

I would like to elaborate on a number of important aspects, which I believe world powers are not paying sufficient attention to regarding nuclear terrorism prevention:

1. Those responsible for combating nuclear terrorism do not factor in casual links in this phenomenon. Most efforts are focused on boosting security and protection of nuclear facilities as well as on denying terrorists access to nuclear weapons, materials and technologies. At the same time, combating international terrorism, which is a new global challenge, seems to be kept on the back burner. It is increasingly evident the main threat to our civilization is not nuclear materials and technologies, although their existence does pose a threat; rather, the main danger is in the human factor: the ranks of individuals who have access to nuclear materials are growing consistently. There may be terrorists or specialists who sympathize with terrorists and have been covertly recruited by them or mentally unstable people in these ranks. Extremist and terrorist ideas and opinions are proliferating in the world exponentially. Yet, the international community continues to put up with the root causes of these ideas and opinions, such as substate and regional conflicts (Arab-Israeli, Pakistani-Indian, Armenian-Azeri conflicts, and dozens of others). These causes include failed states like Somalia, states where drugs are produced freely, such as Afghanistan and Columbia, flourishing international trade in drugs, weapons and dual-use technologies. We can decrease the threat of terrorism, including the foremost threat of WMD terrorism, by achieving peaceful resolutions to most of the conflicts in the world and by enforcing order in our planet's black holes where state authority is virtually absent. There is a strong link between poverty and famine that grips millions of people on one side and increases the number of

terrorist and extremist organizations on the other. It is also time we stopped the arms race on the planet and invest the peace dividends into development of third world countries to narrow the increasing gap between the “rich” and “poor” countries. It is time that Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and Brussels understood that one has to pay for peace and security on the earth. There is the other side of the coin when it comes to globalization of the politics and economics: terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, new diseases, illegal migration, ecological and made-made catastrophes, etc.

2. Given the accelerating pace of scientific and technical progress as well as the growing financial capabilities of terrorists, the latter will likely be able to gain access to nuclear weapons or to some new and even more dangerous weapon in the next decade. The pace at which weapons of mass destruction are eliminated is slower than the pace at which the global terrorism threat is growing, in spite of the agreement that the Russian Federation and United States have reached this spring to downsize their nuclear arsenals. Politicians plan to stretch the elimination of WMD that great powers have accumulated to over 50 years. On one hand, those with common sense should realize that no country would initiate a World War III because it would endanger life on Earth; yet, Cold War inertia is still running strong. Hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars, euros, British pounds, Yuans, and Russian rubles are still spent on the ongoing arms race. Arms exports from the U.S. and other NATO countries, as well as from Russia and China to developing countries, that total tens of billions of dollars annually, are undermining these countries’ economies, destroying and radicalizing their societies. Global arms barons have managed to convince their leaders and legislators that arms trade is a profitable trade that gives employment to the population and generates budget revenues; theirs is a false argument filled with camouflaged lies. Leading states have yet to learn the lessons of massive weapons deliveries to third-world countries during the Cold War. Whose hands have these weapons fallen into? They have fallen into the hands of pirates in Somalia, Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan, Hezbollah and Hamas in the Middle East, and Shia and Sunni terrorist groups in Iraq. How many billions of dollars do the United States and its NATO allies spend on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? What

losses do Somali pirates incur upon the international shipping industry? A modest estimate would total hundreds of billions of dollars per year, which totals the profits made from arms exports.

Stockpiles of WMD and nuclear weapons have been accumulated around the world. Given the current pace at which government agencies work, these weapons will remain stored for hundreds of years. At the same time, we hear unconvincing arguments there is not enough money for disposal of decommissioned nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional weapons. Money is not the only issue, albeit in Russia this issue is complicated by the high level of corruption, of which former minister of atomic energy Yevgeny Adamov is an example. Adamov appropriated millions of U.S. dollars, allocated by American taxpayers, for disposal of Russian nuclear waste.

Only a quick global zero (elimination of all WMD on the earth in several decades) could be the path toward salvation of humankind. We somehow fail to factor in that the world could perish at the hands of terrorists, as easily as from human and criminal negligence (the Chernobyl catastrophe is one example), or from natural or man-made calamities (earthquakes, floods, meteorites, lightning, fire) in areas where WMD are stored or nuclear power plants are located. Terrorist threat will decrease significantly if global powers, Israel, India, North Korea, and Pakistan eliminate all of their WMD and if transfers of dual-use technologies and conventional arms are embargoed. Such measures would also deny terrorists access to WMD and set an example for so-called “threshold” countries such as Iran and South Africa. These countries would then abandon the idea of creating nuclear missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. Arms trade is immoral and unedifying, while business made on blood is criminal. This thesis is more vitally important than ever at the current stage of human evolution. It is unsurprising the UN building is inscribed with Prophet Isaiah’s Biblical words: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Stanislav Mikhailov Ivanov is senior research fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He has PhD in History.

