

Deterring Threat from Weapons of Mass Destruction

Dushyant Singh*

A relaxed security situation has the potential to provide space for non-state actors to launch an attack with Weapons of Mass Destruction. While it may be difficult to deter WMD threats, there are ways and means to minimise the possibility of WMD attacks. The author argues that the solution lies in adopting an integrated approach by simultaneously addressing the 'demand' and 'supply' side of the WMD threat. This would imply maintaining pressure on nuclear capable states to heighten security of nuclear assets and also, severing the drug mafia-terrorist linkages in the longer run. Back channel diplomacy, too, may help in ensuring resolution of the problem.

Potential flash points around the world are in a state of simmering stability with the threshold of violence being critical, but manageable, primarily due to direct involvement of the United States (US) in the concerned region or through extended deterrence by the US over the region. However, a relaxed security

Stanislawski argues that black spots can easily sustain a weapon development programme, as they are able to bring together people with the skills and access materials of WMD development programme.

situation has the potential to provide an operating space for non-state actors to launch an attack with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Victor Asal says there are only five countries, which have suffered mass casualty target attacks [sic] (Iraq, India, Russia, Sri Lanka and US). Attacks on US and Russia are consistent with the argument that terrorism is the weapon of the weak against the strong.¹ The same also applies to Pakistan's use of terror against India. This paper will establish the argument that, while it may be difficult to deter WMD threats, there are some ways and means to minimise the possibility of WMD attacks.

Environment for Development of WMD

The complexity inherent in producing WMD creates the need for terrorist groups to develop a sustained

* Brig. Dushyant Singh is commanding an Infantry Brigade along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.

weapons programme, often outside the reach of even state and international authorities. In considering where such environments are located, Stanislawski during a seminar, focussed on 'black spots' or criminal enclaves where states exercise minimal control; these black spots operate much like the 'black holes' in astronomy. Stanislawski argues with conviction that black spots can easily sustain a weapon development programme, as these black spots often contain, or able to bring together people with the skills, and access to the materials that a WMD development programme requires.² Stanislawski has identified the tri-border area in South America, Peshawar and Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan, Chechnya, several of the Soviet successor states, Nigeria, southern China, Colombia, Mexico and Italy. Likewise, criminals and drug mafias are also posing major threats through links with politicians, police, and the military. In such relationships, it is possible for corrupt high-ranking military officers to provide weapons, or the elements to produce chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, to transnational criminal organisations. A prominent example of the transnational–corrupt state official nexus exists in Russia. Consider, for example, the discovery of a partially constructed Russian submarine by the Colombian police in 2000 in a warehouse in Bogota. The intention of constructing the submarine was to transport up to ten metric tons of illicit drugs.³

While there exists an awareness of the nuclear threat by non-state actors, there is an equally high possibility of a biological weapon being used.

Another report signalling criminal penetration of the Russian armed forces was the attempted theft of 4.5 kilograms of highly enriched uranium from the naval shipyard in Murmansk, Russia.⁴ The porous security environment of Russia could make it possible for transnational terrorists, particularly those like Al-Qaeda, to acquire WMD with ease. The nuclear device so acquired may not be a full-fledged nuclear bomb, but what seems more likely, is the creation of a 'dirty bomb'.⁵ Another worrying example is A.Q. Khan's network, which used the state official–criminal nexus for nuclear proliferation.⁶

Similarly, the ability of determined and motivated religious and ethnical non-state actors to develop a nexus among themselves is on the increase. Gordon M. Hahn, as quoted by John Lloyd, says that "the Chechens' Sufi jihadist warrior culture, their custom of blood revenge, the war's decimation of Chechnya, brutalisation of the population, and the general absence of a negotiating process combined to turn the Chechens towards Islamist jihadism, and its strategy of mass terrorism."⁷

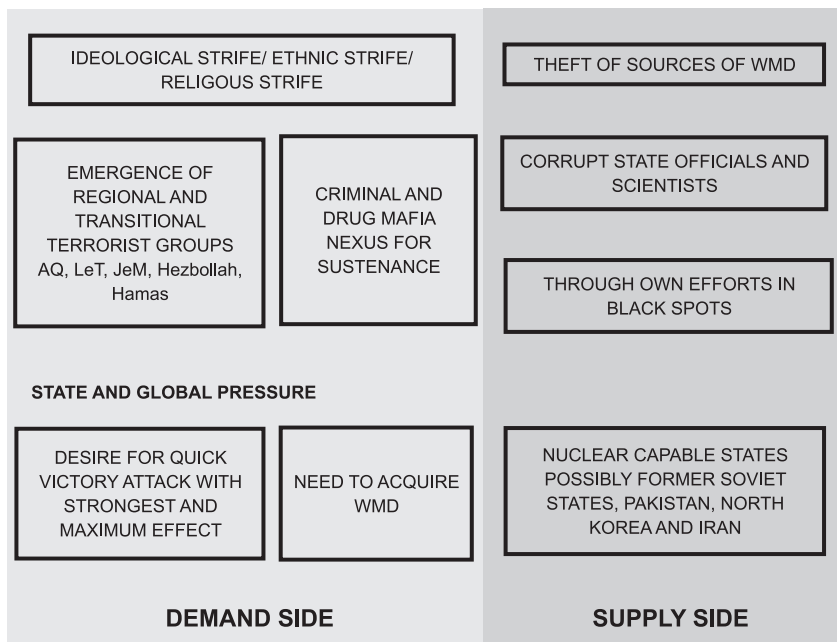
While there exists a considerable awareness of the nuclear threat by non–state actors, there is an equally high possibility of a biological weapon being used with even larger impact on the target country or population. For example, in May 1998, Alibek, told the US congressional committee that the Russians had produced "hundreds of tons of anthrax weapons" which may land up in the

hands of criminal or non-state actors.⁸ Similarly, there is documentary evidence to prove that Al-Qaeda had set up a special wing headed by Abu Khabab to undertake research and development to produce WMD.⁹

As to unique ways in which the modes of deliveries of these weapons can take place, Raman suggests, “terrorists smuggling weapon of mass destruction material such as radiological waste or even biological weapons in a container, and exploding the container through a cellular phone as soon as the vessel carrying the container reaches a major port.”¹⁰

Integrated Approach to Deter WMD Threat

Above arguments establish suggest the viability and feasibility of a threat from weapons of mass destruction. Therefore, the next logical question is, can we deter the WMD threat? To help find an answer to this question, a systemic view of the threat is depicted in the diagram below:



Analysis of the above system suggests that in order to deter the WMD threat, we need to attack the demand side or the supply side or both simultaneously to knock out the WMD threat. Ideally, we should eliminate the demand side, but given the difficulties of visibility of the non-state actors, achieving elimination of terrorists and criminal networks is an extremely difficult proposition. Therefore, this paper suggests that the solution lies in adopting an integrated approach by simultaneously addressing the demand and the supply side of the WMD threat system.

The Demand Side Approach (Deterrence through Punishment)

Attacking the demand side would call for a high-level analysis of groups which are likely to pursue the procurement of WMD. The analysis will entail quality intelligence and information gathering capability. The aim would be to locate and kill the hardcore elements such as the leadership of Al-Qaeda, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hamas by a collaborative of nations. Sandler and Enders have suggested a framework of deterring such groups through a combination of coercion, addressing the grievance of the concerned terrorist groups, physical blocking and massive punishment.¹¹ When we do such an analysis, an intriguing finding emerges, the pressure put on Al-Qaeda since 9/11 has caused Al-Qaeda to eschew 'difficult and costly attacks (particularly hostage taking) for simple bombing with high body counts.' Otherwise, given the high level of passion associated with the hardcore elements of the non-state actors, short of their elimination, no other deterrence is likely to work.

Sandler and Enders suggest a framework of deterring terrorist groups by combining coercion, addressing grievance of the groups and massive punishment.

The Supply Side Approach (Deterrence through Denial)

The other approach to deter the WMD threat is by addressing the supply side. This would involve exercising tight security control over existing nuclear facilities of various nuclear-capable states. In addition, action will have to be taken to convince all those nation states which are striving to obtain nuclear capability to drop their programmes. The abandoning of nuclear development programmes, unfortunately, has to be undertaken by the leadership of the US but under the umbrella of the UN, to enhance both legitimacy and the acceptance level. The signing of the UNSC 1540 resolution on non-proliferation of WMD is an extremely important step in this direction. The UNSC 1540 resolution is a good beginning, but it circumvents the question of state responsibility for proliferation of WMD. Merav Danan says that the UNSC 1540 circumvents the question of state responsibility for proliferation of WMD by focusing on access by non-state actors to NBC weapons and defining non-state actor for the purpose of the resolution as: "individual or entity,

The abandoning of nuclear development programmes has to be undertaken by the US but under the umbrella of the UN, to enhance legitimacy and the acceptance.

not acting under the lawful authority of any State in conducting activities which come within the scope of this resolution.” It is thus unclear whether the provision could have been used in relation to the nuclear black-market of AQ Khan, which appears to have been integrally bound up with the Pakistani state, where lines of state authority were deliberately blurred to provide plausible deniability.¹²

Complementary to the UNSC 1540 is the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) sponsored by the USA, and currently functioning under the leadership of UK.


The probability of Iran transferring weapons to non-state actors may be due to its close links with Hezbollah.

PSI is not a formal treaty—it is a partnership. Old-style international organisations simply are not agile enough to fight modern day WMD traffickers. PSI signatories can act within hours to intercept weapons shipments, and they do so through voluntary cooperation. The Korean resolution should help resolve any doubt about the legality of intercepting ships or planes that are carrying WMD technology.¹³ However, the UNSC 1540 and the PSI need to be made more robust, realistic, and effective.

Another issue on the supply side is to analyse the possibility of declared and undeclared nuclear states providing WMD to non-state actors. Such an analysis identifies only few countries which may promote WMD falling into the hands of terrorists. The possible states are the former states of Russia, Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran (as and when it develops a nuclear capability) and North Korea. The probability of Iran transferring such weapons to non-state actors may be a distinct possibility due to its close links with Hezbollah on the lines of the AQ Khan case (the observation has been rectified as a possibility). The good news, though, is that the probability of Iran pursuing a nuclear programme is very low.¹⁴ Finally, it appears that Russia or a few of the former independent states of the former Soviet Union may become a possible source of WMD proliferation. However, deterring Russia is fraught with catastrophe for obvious reasons. Luckily, an encouraging phenomenon recently observed is that Russia is actively contributing to initiatives such as PSI and UNSC 1540.¹⁵ However, de-linking the Chechen rebels from Al-Qaeda needs to be undertaken sincerely. A high level of US-Russia dialogue and resolution of the Chechen problem amicably may be the only way out of this situation. Back channel diplomacy may possibly be the other way to ensure resolution of the problem.

Conclusion

In summary, we need to address simultaneously the demand and the supply side of the WMD threat spectrum, through international partnerships. We must

maintain pressure on nuclear capable states to heighten security in order to prevent access to their nuclear facilities and weapons. We need to sever the drug mafia–terrorist linkage, since drug money is a major source of financing for terrorist organisations. Finally, we can conclude that although the WMD threat situation is critical, it is not easy for non-state actors with limited resources and capabilities to acquire and launch WMD attacks. 

Notes

1. Edited by A. Blum, A. Victor, W. Jonathan, "Non-state Actors, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction", Seminar papers at Center for International Development and Conflict Management of the University of Maryland on October 15, 2004. Available at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/publications/publication.asp?pubType=article&id=39>, accessed February 2, 2008, pp. 22.
2. Ibid. pp. 3, 4.
3. David Willman, "Fear Inc. – A Times Investigation; Selling the Threat of Bioterrorism", Home Edition, Los Angeles Times, July 1, 2007. Available at <http://www.proquest.com/> accessed on February 16, 2008.
4. Ibid.
5. B. H. Stanislawski, "Transnational Organized Crime, Terrorism, and WMD", 2004, pp. 26-27.
6. 67 Auerswald, David P. 2006
7. John Lloyd, "Whose side can we be on? The real story of the Chechen war defies simple good-versus-bad explanations", Surveys Edition, Financial Times, May 19, 2007. Available at <http://www.proquest.com/> accessed on February 16, 2008. Dr. Gordon Hahn is a Senior Researcher for the Center for Terrorism and Intelligence Studies at Smolny College, St. Petersburg State University, Russia.
8. David Willman, "Fear Inc. -- A Times Investigation; Selling The Threat Of Bioterrorism; A Scientist Defected, Warned Of Epidemics, Helped Shape Policy And Sought To Profit", Home Edition, Los Angeles Times, July 1, 2007. Available at <http://www.proquest.com/> accessed on February 16, 2008.
9. Ibid.
10. B. Raman, "Global Jihadi Terrorism-Threats and Vulnerabilities", available at <http://globalgeopolitics.net/art/0120-Raman-Global-Jihadi-Terrorism.htm> accessed on February 2, 2008.
11. Edited by A. Blum, A. Victor, W. Jonathan, "Non-state Actors, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction", Seminar papers at Center for International Development and Conflict Management of the University of Maryland on October 15, 2004. Available at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/publications/publication.asp?pubType=article&id=39> accessed on February 2, 2008, pp. 5.
12. Datan Merav, "Disarmament Diplomacy: Security Council Resolution 1540: WMD and Non-State Trafficking." Available at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd79/79md.htm/> accessed on February 16, 2008.
13. "Asia's WMD Laggards", Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition, July 24, 2006. Available at <http://www.proquest.com/> accessed February 16, 2008.
14. "Bombs away", The Economist, July 21, 2007, pp. 8. Available at accessed February 16, 2008. "Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, has gone so far as to issue a fatwa (religious decree) declaring the possession or use of WMD as illegal . . . It should also be noted in Iran's defence that the nuclear agency has as yet found no conclusive evidence that Iran is running a nuclear-weapons programme."
15. Anonymous, "Disarmament Diplomacy: Security Council Resolution 1540: WMD and Non-state Trafficking", Available at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd79/79md.htm/> accessed on February 16, 2008.