

The 'dirty bomb' threatens both Russia and the US

The two countries must cooperate on nuclear issues if they are going to keep radioactive materials out of the hands of terrorists

By Ehsan Ahrari

The stories of the so-called "loose nukes" surfaced almost immediately after the implosion of the Soviet Union. Even General Alexander Lebed attempted to give credence to such stories by claiming in 1997, that more than 100 suitcases with nuclear bombs were smuggled out of Russia.

More recently, the BBC quoted a spokesman of the IAEA, David Kyd, as saying that "there are about 175 cases of seizure of nuclear material being smuggled from former Soviet republics." The same source cited the observation of a Russian General that unidentified terrorists "had recently twice tried and failed to penetrate Russian nuclear storage."

However, in the post-Sept. 11 days, the specter of the radiological dispersion bomb-the so-called the 'dirty bomb'-surfaced with much credibility. The US intelligence sources have found convincing evidence that al-Qaeda terrorist group was very much interested either in getting its hands on a dirty bomb, or manufacturing one. "Dirty bomb" refers to highly radioactive material, such as Cesium 137 or spent fuel nuclear rods, wrapped in conventional high explosives. A potential explosion of such a weapon would not kill a large number of people, but it could contaminate the area of explosion, causing death, cancer, and other health problems for an indefinite period.

In the first week of March, Senator Joseph Biden, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, during hearings on the issue of theft of highly enriched uranium (HEU), characterized Russia as "the candy store" for terrorists.

The dirty bomb's capability as a terror weapon should not only worry the US, but also Russia. The deleterious effects of the Sept. 11 attacks on the national psyche in the US will be felt for quite sometime. But the potential explosion of a dirty bomb is likely to create even more devastating outcome. As Biden observed, the potential explosion of a dirty bomb may not be "the catastrophic event," "but it would have a catastrophic psychological effect on the United States."

Its effects on the US economy could also be devastating. The US government knows how vulnerable it is as an open society, and how that openness can be exploited by a determined terrorist group, not only in the near future, but at any time and place of their choosing. Russia is conducting a brutal campaign against the Chechen rebels. In view of the gross asymmetry between the superior Russian military forces and the rag-tag Chechen fighters, the availability of a dirty bomb might create a situation from which Russia might not be able to extricate itself for a long time.

The issue of the dirty bomb also undermines US President George W. Bush's argument that the US is vulnerable to a ballistic or a cruise missile attack from one of the so-called rogue states. No rogue state is mad enough to commit the suicidal act of shooting a missile in the direction of the US and be wiped out in retaliation. However, a nameless and a faceless terrorist group may be able to import a dirty bomb and drop it from a high building.

The specter of dirty bomb also necessitates that the US and Russia revisit the issue of cooperation on the multifaceted nuclear issues between the two. The Bush administration, rather thoughtlessly, abandoned the ABM Treaty by claiming that it had become a "relic" of the bygone Cold War era. President Bush was only partially right in that observation. The ABM was indeed created during a bygone era when the FSU and the US had an adversarial relationship.

Even though that relationship has transformed into a non-adversarial one, it still remains highly competitive. Even then, the fact of the matter is that the US clearly enjoys substantial advantages over Russia in the post-Cold War era.

Bush not only abandoned the ABM Treaty, but also insisted that the two countries no longer need to negotiate the type of treaties of the Cold War years. Since the US was the advantaged actor of the two, it sounded quite magnanimous about its ties with Russia, and wanted to move away from the tedious formalities of negotiating nuclear arms treaties. However, from a position of disadvantage, Russia's best hopes of competing with the US in the realm of nuclear affairs was to formalize their mutual understandings and agreements, and ensure that the latter would not cavalierly change its mind over the specifics of such arrangements.

For instance, in explicating its "nuclear posture review," the Bush administration stated that it hopes "to shift emphasis away from offensive nuclear forces and augment the US strategic posture with enhanced conventional capabilities and missile defenses" It announced its plans to reduce deployed strategic forces to 3,800 by the year 2007.

The most controversial part of the nuclear posture was what the administration proposed to do with "the warheads removed from service." Some of those warheads were to be destroyed, but the Bush administration also planned to allocate portions of the remainder of those warheads to what it calls a "responsive force," which "could be used to augment deployed nuclear forces within weeks, months, or years should the need arise."

The much-heralded unilateralism of George Bush was very much alive and well, rumors to the contrary notwithstanding. Russia knew that its choices were limited. Even though it preferred a treaty, it was willing to accept an executive agreement, if that was the best Bush was prepared to offer.

In the post-Sept. 11 environment, it is necessary for the US to become less cavalier and more understanding of Russia's disadvantageous position in the ongoing nuclear arms race. A weak Russia may not only continue to probe for advantages over the US, but by remaining weak, it also remains a potential source for nuclear smuggling, theft, and even an outright sell-out to the terrorists.

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