

Preventing Catastrophic Terrorism

Ashton Carter opened the panel by emphasizing that proliferation is the path to catastrophic terrorism. After September 11, President Bush said his highest priority was keeping weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of terrorists. Carter argued that our country is visibly at war against the “worst people,” as evidenced by the military action in Afghanistan, the \$100 billion increase in the defense budget and the reorganization of the intelligence community; however, there is no comparable level of activity for the war against the weapons.

Nuclear and biological weapons have the potential to do the most harm, but in Carter’s view the approaches to these two forms of terrorism are different.

- For nuclear weapons, “all the action is in prevention,” he says; if terrorists cannot get a hold of plutonium or highly-enriched uranium, they will not have nuclear capabilities. Once the fissile materials get out, it would be difficult to find them before they are used in an attack.
- Biological materials are much easier to produce, so the key is to detect a biological attack after it happens and to launch an effective public health response before the massive outbreak of disease.

Of the eight countries that have “gone nuclear,” four of them are undergoing substantial turmoil and risk diversion to terrorists, according to Carter: Russia, North Korea, Pakistan and China. He sees two possibilities for where we will be after another 60 years. First is a world where the nuclear threat is eradicated because fissile materials are only made in a few, stable locations with tight international surveillance. The other is a world where radical individuals and small extremist groups have access to destructive power and our societies live in constant fear of wild retaliation.

Congressman Schiff started off with the good news that the threat of mutually-assured destruction from nuclear weapons has receded into the distance. However, we know that Osama bin Laden is intent on acquiring nuclear weapons and detonating an “American Hiroshima” in our cities. President Bush and John Kerry both agreed during the debates last year that the number one threat to this country is nuclear materials falling into the wrong hands. Yet, the current expenditures do not reflect this reality.

Congressman Schiff cited a few challenges Congress has in facing our greatest threat. First, Congress is a reactive body that tends to mobilize after a catastrophe. Second, nuclear terrorism is a technical field that can be difficult to discuss. Finally, there is no central authority on the subject and, just like departments in the executive branch, Congressional committees overlap and do not always cooperate.

Despite these obstacles, Congressman Schiff has seen incremental progress. For example, Congress has expanded the range of the Nunn-Lugar program and has increased funding for global nuclear clean-up. He encouraged the audience to write more op-eds and letters to their representatives because much more work needs to be done.

Rose Gottemoeller agreed with Carter that the eradication of nuclear terrorism was possible, but said too relaxed attitude toward nonproliferation will prevent us from reaching this goal. In the Carnegie Endowment's Universal Compliance, the authors noted that the Bush Administration has adopted a good-guy/bad-guy approach which says it is okay for our friends, like Japan, to consider nuclear options, but not our enemies. This policy undermines the long-standing international norm against proliferation.

Gottemoeller believes we have the tools to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The experience we gained in cooperative threat reduction with the former Soviet states can help us deal with tough cases like North Korea. She felt it is important to build mutual confidence and suggested scientist-to-scientist exchanges that make all parties feel they have something to contribute. Another factor for success is to broaden the community of partners. Gottemoeller recommended inviting the participation of countries like Kazakhstan, who recently decommissioned its reactor site in Aktau and has cultural and histories ties with North Korea.

Princeton University's **Christopher Chyba** shifted the discussion back to biological terrorism. Approximately 15 million people die every year from infectious diseases. There is a growing risk that pandemics, like avian influenza and SARS, could have global consequences.

Historically, there have been few biological attacks; the reasons biological terrorism is so rare have to do with capability and intent. We know that it is becoming easier and less expensive to create harmful organisms, but most studies have paid little attention to the motivation of terrorist groups to use biological weapons.

Chyba views weapons of mass destruction along a spectrum – nuclear weapons are at one end and cyber weapons are on the other and biological and chemical weapons are inbetween. As time goes on, biological weapons are moving closer to the “cyber” end.

In crafting a comprehensive strategy to combat biological terrorism, Chyba advocates addressing five levels of concern: 1) emerging diseases; 2) state programs; 3) sub-state programs; 4) non-state programs; and 5) hackers who can unleash debilitating computer viruses on the Internet. He stressed that progress with biotechnology has been increasing at an exponential rate and that these rapid advances could be used for “nefarious purposes as well as defensive purposes.”

Chyba suggested building a “web of prevention.” Each strand of the web is inadequate on its own, but together they hold the web together. Strengthening some strands may weaken others, so it is important to adopt appropriate measures to safeguard the most dangerous pathogens and sequences.

*Summary prepared by Lucy Wichlacz
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