



# BACKGROUND

*Published by the Truman National Security Project*

## Nuclear Weapons: A New Paradigm for the 21st Century

Frankie Sturm, Truman National Security Project

30 July 2009

### Advisory Board:

Madeleine K. Albright  
*Principal*  
*The Albright Group LLC*

Coit D. Blacker  
*Director & Senior Fellow,*  
*Freeman Spogli Institute,*  
*Stanford University*

Kurt M. Campbell  
*Former CEO & Co-Founder*  
*Center for a New*  
*American Security*

Gregory Craig  
*Former Partner, Williams*  
*and Connolly LLP*

Leslie H. Gelb  
*President Emeritus*  
*Council on Foreign Relations*

William Marshall  
*President*  
*Progressive Policy Institute*

William J. Perry  
*Senior Fellow*  
*Hoover Institution*

John D. Podesta  
*President and CEO*  
*Center for American Progress*

Wendy R. Sherman  
*Former Principal*  
*The Albright Group LLC*

Anne-Marie Slaughter  
*Former Dean*  
*Woodrow Wilson School*  
*Princeton University*

### CEO:

Rachel Kleinfeld

Six nuclear warheads went missing from an air force base in the summer of 2007.<sup>1</sup> For thirty-six hours, military officials could not account for the whereabouts of the deadly weapons. For fifteen hours, the warheads were guarded by nothing more than a chain-link fence and roving patrols. After a day and a half the weapons were finally located, but not before the world was reminded that the security of nuclear weapons can too easily fall victim to human error.

One might expect such an occurrence in a new nuclear weapons state, where military officials and technicians have less experience with safeguarding a nuclear arsenal. But the “Bent Spear” incident took place in the nation with the world’s most sophisticated military: the United States.

### Nuclear Weapons: The Problem, Not the Solution

If nuclear weapons can go missing here in the U.S., they can go missing anywhere. In a world of terrorists determined to obtain a nuclear bomb, and a black market with state and non-state actors keen on profiting from the sale of necessary technology, the deterrence paradigm that reigned during the Cold War no longer works. In a new era, we need new thinking grounded in a simple notion: nuclear weapons are not the solution to our security, they are the problem.

***Nuclear weapons now create more danger than security for two main reasons: nuclear terrorism and nuclear accidents.***

*“To possess the [nuclear] weapons that could counter those of the infidels is a religious duty.”*  
- Osama bin Laden

Terrorist organizations are actively seeking nuclear weapons, while black market syndicates and rogue state suppliers are seeking to provide the necessary technology. Nuclear accidents continue to pose a threat as they did during the Cold War, but the possibility that accidents – such as misplacing nuclear warheads – could put nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists raises the stakes even higher. To gain a full understanding of the problems posed by nuclear terrorism and nuclear accidents, one must examine each threat in turn.

### Why are Nuclear Weapons the Problem? Terrorist Intentions and Rogue Suppliers

The possibility of terrorists attaining a nuclear weapon poses the single-greatest threat to U.S. national security, and terrorist groups are actively seeking these weapons. Osama bin Laden himself laid down the gauntlet on nuclear weapons:

*“To possess the weapons that could counter those of the infidels is a religious duty.”<sup>2</sup>*

During the last two decades there have been at least 25 instances of nuclear explosive materials being lost or stolen,<sup>3</sup> while several nuclear and near nuclear states maintain shadowy connections with terrorist groups.



**U.S. leaders who recognize the new security threats posed by nuclear weapons:**

**Henry Kissinger**, *Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon*

**William Perry**, *Secretary of Defense under President Bill Clinton*

**George Schultz**, *Secretary of State under President Ronald Reagan*

**Sam Nunn**, *former U.S. Senator (D-GA)*

**Frank Carlucci**, *Secretary of Defense and National Security Advisor under President Ronald Reagan*

**Richard Burt**, *Chief U.S. Negotiator in the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks with the Former Soviet Union under President Ronald Reagan*

**Zbigniew Brzezinski**, *National Security Advisor under President Jimmy Carter*

**Sandy Berger**, *National Security Advisor under President Bill Clinton*

**Philip Zelikow**, *Senior Advisor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice*

**Iran** is regarded by U.S. officials as the world's single greatest state sponsor of terrorism, and is currently seeking nuclear technology that is probably intended for weaponization.<sup>4</sup>

**North Korea** already has nuclear weapons technology, is hard up for cash, and is suspected of providing arms to Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers. It has supplied Libya with missile technology, and U.S. officials suspect it helped Syria construct a nuclear reactor which Israel destroyed last year.<sup>5</sup>

**Pakistan** is arguably the world's most dangerous nuclear weapons state. Members of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence service (ISI) have provided support to the Taliban, al Qaeda, and terrorist organizations that have staged attacks in India. The father of Pakistan's nuclear program, AQ Khan, headed a secret network that sold nuclear technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea. Reports from U.S. officials and think tanks suggest that remnants of the Khan network are still active. Whether the network transferred nuclear technology to al Qaeda remains unknown.<sup>6</sup>

This adds up to a frightening reality: terrorists have more opportunities to acquire nuclear weapons than ever before. This makes the mere existence of nuclear weapons in any state a greater threat to U.S. security than at any time since the nuclear age began. In addition to these rogue states, accidents and misplaced weapons in friendly states can enable terrorists to gain weapons.

**Why are Nuclear Weapons the Problem? Accidents**

Accidents happen, but the price of a nuclear accident is impermissible. Yet, past incidents over the last several decades far less known than "Chernobyl" could very well have led to more catastrophic results:

**1979, U.S. Mistakes Computer Exercise for Soviet Nuclear Strike.** When a realistic training tape was mistakenly inserted into the computer running the United States' early warning system, launch control centers for Minuteman missiles received preliminary warning that the U.S. was under attack, while the entire continental air de-

fense interceptor force was put on alert. In a country with less sophisticated systems, such an incident could have provoked a hasty retaliatory strike and accidental nuclear war.<sup>7</sup>

*"Mistakes are made in every other human endeavor. Why should nuclear weapons be exempt?"*

- Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger

**1988, Pakistan Mistakes Explosion for Indian Nuclear Attack.** When a massive conventional munitions explosion occurred at a secret ammunition dump near Rawalpindi, some Pakistani officials mistook it for the start of an Indian nuclear strike. Given the size of Pakistan's conventional forces compared to India's – and the proximity of the two nations, cutting down the decision time in the event of a launch – such an incident could easily have resulted in accidental nuclear war.<sup>8</sup>

**1995, Russia Mistakes Weather Balloon for U.S. Nuclear Strike.** When Norway launched a weather rocket to investigate the Northern Lights, Russian radars mistook the rocket for a missile launched by a U.S. submarine. Russian officials scrambled their nuclear forces into position and activated President Boris Yeltsin's "nuclear briefcase." A nation that feels vulnerable to nuclear attack might feel obligated to launch a retaliatory strike before all the facts are in, leading to an accidental nuclear war.<sup>9</sup>

The list of nuclear accidents and potential calamities goes on.<sup>10</sup> As clearly put by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger,

*"Mistakes are made in every other human endeavor. Why should nuclear weapons be exempt?"<sup>11</sup>*

In addition to the threat of discrete nuclear accidents lies the broader problem of loose nuclear material. Russia possesses more than 10,000 nuclear warheads, many of which are poorly guarded and vulnerable to



**U.S. leaders who recognize the new security threats posed by nuclear weapons:**

**Philip Coyle**, *Assistant Secretary of Defense and Director of Operational Test and Evaluation in the DoD under President Bill Clinton*

**Lawrence Eagleburger**, *Secretary of State under President George H.W. Bush*

**Chuck Hagel**, *former U.S. Senator (R-NE)*

**Lee Hamilton**, *former U.S. Congressman (D-IN) and Vice-Chair of the 9/11 Commission*

**Bob Kerrey**, *former U.S. Senator (D-NE)*

**Anthony Lake**, *National Security Advisor under President Bill Clinton*

**Robert McFarlane**, *National Security Advisor under President Ronald Reagan*

**Strobe Talbott**, *Deputy Secretary of State under President Bill Clinton*

**Anthony Zinni**, *former Commander in Chief U.S. Central Command and retired four-star General with the U.S. Marine Corps*

theft.<sup>12</sup> Although the U.S. and Russia have worked together through the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction initiative to secure nuclear material and deactivate thousands of warheads, analysts fear that underpaid scientists and lax security could create a situation in which a terrorist group could buy or steal a bomb.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal remains in question, stoking fears that state collapse in that volatile country could also enable terrorists to acquire a nuclear weapon.<sup>14</sup>

The accidental detonation of a single nuclear weapon could kill thousands; an accidental nuclear war could kill millions worldwide. This threat has been with us for decades, but the prospect that mistakes or mishaps could inadvertently help terrorists obtain nuclear weapons adds extra gravity to the threat.

With these challenges in mind, negotiations between Presidents Obama and Medvedev in July 2009 included the creation of a U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission and a new joint missile-launch monitoring facility in order to reduce the likelihood of accidents and misunderstandings.<sup>15</sup> Yet the risk of nuclear accidents remains, setting a serious limit on the utility of nuclear weapons in U.S. security policy.

### **Compounding the Threat: A New Arms Race**

The prestige and power widely associated with nuclear weapons drives countries to pursue them as a means of asserting power beyond actual security needs. Iran presents an instructive case. Recent protests illustrate that the Iranian people have significant qualms with their government, yet 94% support a nuclear energy program and 52% support a nuclear weapons program.<sup>16</sup> Although Iran is run by a government that does not command the respect of its people, Iranians seem to believe their government's nuclear program will win the respect of the world. Hence head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohamed El-Baradei's description of Iran's nuclear program as "the road to get...recognition and power and prestige."<sup>17</sup>

When this desire for prestige becomes intertwined with security concerns, the rationale for nuclear weapons deepens. As this scenario plays out in Iran and North Korea, there is a risk that their neighbors – motivated by security concerns – will develop nuclear weapons of their own.

Increasing the likelihood of nuclear accidents and nuclear terrorism, a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and/or Asia would pose a tremendous threat to international peace and security.

**In the Middle East**, the combination of unstable states and jihadist networks yields an unpredictable combination of potential suppliers and determined consumers. Given the wars that have taken place between Muslim nations and Israel in the last half-century, the possibility of nuclear conflict could drastically escalate threats to regional security.

**In Asia**, North Korea's nuclear program and erratic behavior could convince Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons. Japan's civilian nuclear capacity could be quickly converted into a weapons program. In a region with longstanding hostilities, especially between China and Japan, this could add yet another layer of distrust and insecurity to an already tense region.

In fact, responding to North Korean missile and nuclear tests in 2009, politicians in both Japan and South Korea have begun to call for the development of nuclear weapons in their respective countries.<sup>18</sup> If North Korea proceeds on its current trajectory, such calls are sure to increase.

This plausible chain of events suggests that a new arms race could be significantly more dangerous than the U.S.-Soviet arms race of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is in this realm of guaranteeing the security of our allies—so they do not pursue nuclear deterrents of their own—that the U.S. nuclear arsenal still plays a crucial role. Without extended deterrence – extending our nuclear umbrella to allies such as Japan and Saudi Arabia – it is likely that more countries will develop their own nuclear weapons, increasing the overall threat of nuclear terrorism and accidents.



## Turning the Paradigm into Policy

If nuclear weapons themselves are the security problem, then fewer nuclear weapons must be part of the security solution. This suggests three goals for U.S. policy:

1. Eliminate unnecessary nuclear weapons, and strengthen the weakened barriers towards obtaining new nuclear weapons. Fewer weapons mean fewer chances for nuclear terrorism or nuclear accidents.
2. Work with other nations to shift the paradigm toward recognizing nuclear weapons as the problem and thus reduce the prestige associated with possessing them. The less desirable they are to obtain, the fewer nuclear weapons will be created.
3. To prevent proliferation in the Middle East and Asia in the near-term, the U.S. must maintain a reliable, credible deterrent. By preventing further proliferation, this will result in fewer nuclear weapons worldwide.

President Obama has embraced this new paradigm while pledging to retain a robust nuclear deterrent for the United States and its allies so long as nuclear weapons continue to exist. Regarding the elimination of unnecessary weapons, he has signed a deal with Russia to reduce the U.S. and Russian arsenals, which account for 95% of the world's 23,000 nuclear weapons. In terms of reducing the prestige of and increasing the barriers to obtaining nuclear weapons, he has committed the United States to a long-term vision of zero nuclear weapons and expressed his support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).<sup>19</sup>

Unless the United States continues to take steps in this direction in strong cooperation with other nuclear weapons states, the dangers of nuclear accidents and terrorism will only increase. Nuclear weapons represent a problem that admits of no easy solution. But the possibility of a nuclear 9/11 requires U.S. policymakers to make tough decisions and adopt new policies in support of a new paradigm that meets the nuclear dangers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Works Cited

- 1.) Warrick and Pincus, "Missteps in the Bunker," *Washington Post*, 23 September 2007; 2.) Sagan and Waltz, *Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (Norton 2003) p. 162; 3.) "Scrapping nuclear arms is now realpolitik," *The Times*, 1 April 2009; 4.) "State Sponsors: Iran," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 2007; 5.) For reading on North Korea's many illicit activities: Nikitin, "North Korea's Nuclear Program," CRS Report, 22 February 2009; Niksch, "North Korea: Terrorism List Removal?" CRS Report, 2 February 2009; "Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: North Korea," Arms Control Association; 6.) "Pakistan's ISI still linked to militants, U.S. says," *Reuters*, 28 March 2009; David Montero, "Report: Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan aided Iran," *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 May 2007; "The AQ Khan Network: Case Closed?" Hearing, Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 25 May 2006; 7.) Geoffrey Forden, "False Alarms on the Nuclear Front," *PBS Nova Online*; 8.) Sagan and Waltz, *Ibid.*; 9.) Charles Glaser and Steve Fetter, "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001); 10.) Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, (Princeton University Press 1993); 11.) Quoted in "Toward a Nuclear Free World," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2008; 12.) "Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: Russia" Arms Control Association; "Loose Nukes," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2006; 13.) "The Nunn-Lugar Scorecard," website of Senator Richard Lugar; "Loose Nukes," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2006; 14.) Joby Warrick, "Pakistan Nuclear Security Questioned," *Washington Post*, 11 November 2007; Paul Kerr and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Proliferation and Security Issues," *CRS Report*, 12 June 2009; 15.) "U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission," White House Press Release, 6 July 2009; Pincus, "Missile Pact Based on Old Plan," *Washington Post*, 13 July 2009; 16.) Public Opinion Poll, Terror Free Tomorrow and the New America Foundation, May 2009; 17.) "ElBaradei: Iran wants nuclear weapon as an 'insurance policy'" *AFP*, 18 June 2009; 18.) Danielle Demetriou, "Japan 'should develop nuclear weapons' to counter North Korea threat," *The Telegraph*, 20 April 2009; Kiho Yi, "The North Korean nuclear test: The South Korean reaction," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 5 June 2009; 19.) Barack Obama, Prague Speech 2009; Dianne Feinstein, "Russian nuclear agreement a good start," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 July 2009. U.S. leaders who support the security goal of a world free of nuclear weapons from <http://www.globalzero.org/en/who>.

This Paper Can be Found at

[www.trumanproject.org](http://www.trumanproject.org)

By signing up as member you can receive this paper on a regular basis upon its release. Published by:

### Truman National Security Project

1420 K Street NW, Suite 250  
Washington, DC 20005  
Telephone: 202-216-9723  
[info@trumanproject.org](mailto:info@trumanproject.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Truman National Security Project or an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.