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The Next Generation WMD Nonproliferation Agenda

The WMD supply chain is moving to parts of the world that have very little interest in the global nonproliferation regime, warns Johan Bergen. That means it's time for an updated nonproliferation agenda that accounts for the socio-economic needs of developing and emerging nations.

By Johan Bergen for ISN

The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the Conventions on Chemical and Biological Weapons remain the key pillars of the global nonproliferation regime to prevent the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. To date, this regime has largely been successful in containing widespread proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Only nine countries currently possess nuclear weapons; another four countries have relinquished their nuclear weapons capabilities; a nuclear or "dirty bomb" has not been used by a terrorist organization; WMD stockpiles have sharply declined worldwide; and serious negotiations about Iran's nuclear program are underway. In short, there is much to be said about the success of nonproliferation and disarmament regimes over the last 60 years. Yet, there are darker clouds on the horizon.

The coming storm

Like his predecessors, Barack Obama has stated unequivocally that the American people face no greater danger than a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon. He has further asserted that the success in preventing terrorist acquisition of a WMD depends upon broad consensus of all nations. Many other world leaders have joined President Obama in his call to action. To that end, over 45 countries gathered at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington (2010) and declared that securing all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world within four years would be paramount to global security.

Yet, despite all the rhetoric, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continues to report serious incidents of diversion, theft or loss of nuclear and other radioactive materials. Last year alone, the IAEA's Nuclear Incident and Trafficking Database (ITDB) confirmed 146 such cases. That figure included 6 instances involving possession and related criminal activities, 47 involving theft or loss of material, and 95 involving other unauthorized activities—and these are only the known incidents. Organizations charged with preventing the spread of chemical and biological weapons note similarly worrisome incidents.

The continued and accelerating spread of materials associated with WMD is due to three aspects of the changing proliferation environment. First, the licit and illicit trade of WMD and related materials is increasingly moving southward, meaning that, to a greater extent, emerging and developing countries are part of – wittingly or unwittingly – the WMD supply chain as dual-use innovators and manufacturers, critical transshipment points and financial centers, or breeding grounds for terrorist sympathies. In such a proliferation environment, absent participation by all countries that represent links in the global proliferation supply chain efforts to curb WMD proliferation to countries and terrorist groups will ultimately fail.

Second, as a result of globalization and skyrocketing levels of international trade over the last 30 years, at no other time in the nuclear era is the private sector more involved – again wittingly and unwittingly – in the proliferation chain of WMD technologies. The Syrian proliferation saga is just one recent example of today’s more complex WMD proliferation environment. To be sure, Russia and North Korea have facilitated Syria’s chemical weapons program, but front companies in the Middle East and around the world have also played a major role in providing materials related to Bashar Al Assad.

The United States, for example, has [accused](#), *inter alia*, the Syria International Islamic Bank of helping Assad to obtain WMD. There are also [reports](#) of British companies being implicated in illicit transfers of WMD materials to the Assad regime. As noted in a previous [ISN article](#), the international community needs to revamp its nonproliferation efforts vis-à-vis the private sector.

Third, the international community has largely failed to develop a long term and sustainable WMD nonproliferation strategy that is suitable for emerging and developing countries. To date, the great majority of WMD nonproliferation initiatives aimed at emerging and developing countries have been seen as Western-imposed measures that are ill-connected to national and regional priorities.

Indeed, in contrast to WMD nonproliferation assistance, governments of the Global South seek capacity building assistance and partnerships to address more critical national needs, such as improved border control, policing and judicial capabilities, which more directly apply to broader global challenges like conventional arms and drug trafficking, growing energy needs, human smuggling, piracy, environmental crime, public health issues and more.

In recent decades, this disconnect between the Global North and South has resulted in wasted resources, siloed approaches to mitigating these challenges, a lack of local ownership and, as such, ineffective partnerships. Indeed, today there exists widespread confusion among the WMD nonproliferation donor community on how to effectively engage Southern countries that – for good reasons – do not view the proliferation of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons as an immediate threat to their societies and the well-being of its citizens.

Crosscutting solutions

In light of a proliferation supply chain moving to parts of the world where little WMD nonproliferation resources and interest exist, it is clear that a wider discussion on WMD nonproliferation capacity building is necessary, especially one which considers the higher priorities of emerging economies and developing regions.

Such overlapping conversations must take place in platforms that traditionally have only dealt with WMD nonproliferation, softer security capacity building and even economic development in silos. In short, the next generation WMD nonproliferation regime must include pragmatic programs, which simultaneously address local and national priorities in emerging and developing countries, with the important mission of preventing the proliferation of WMDs.

Fortunately, arenas for this dialogue are rapidly emerging. For example, on July 11 this year, the Organization of American States (OAS) [hosted](#) a seminar focused on how United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 – a WMD nonproliferation measure from 2004 – can assist OAS member states in reaching its higher priority concerns, like tackling the illicit trade in drugs and conventional arms.

The vision identified behind OAS's involvement on these matters is that modern nonproliferation mechanisms, such as UNSCR 1540, can dually prevent the spread of WMDs as well as further the higher priorities of emerging and developing countries. UNSCR 1540 specifically calls for countries to develop effective and appropriate measures with regard to security and safety of WMD-related materials, border controls, strategic trade controls, equip and train law enforcement officials and adopt laws to combat the illicit trade in these dangerous technologies.

However, while Resolution 1540 targets the nonproliferation of WMD, the mandate and assistance available under this measure can have a dual impact on a wide range of security and development challenges. Consider these examples:

- Border security aimed at preventing WMD proliferation to non-state actors also inhibits regional terrorist activities;
- Many of the resources required to limit dual-use nuclear products from being trafficked throughout emerging and developing countries are the same as those needed for the capacity-building necessary to combat conventional arms and drug smuggling;
- Strategic trade controls at national boundaries (land, sea and air) promote efficiencies at transit hubs that in turn facilitate trade expansion and business development;
- Detecting and responding to biological weapons requires sophisticated equipment and training that is similar to building a functional disease surveillance network and a public health infrastructure; and
- Preventing human trafficking relies upon many of the same resources and capacities necessary to detect and prevent movement of terrorists or nuclear components and materials to states and terrorist organizations.

Similar processes of implementing key WMD nonproliferation mandates through a “dual benefit” approach are also underway in other emerging and developing regions, such as [Africa](#) and Southeast Asia.

And beyond...

It is not only the WMD nonproliferation community that is seeking to integrate its programming with other areas of work. Consider the emerging agenda for the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), due to be in effect by 2016.

The new blueprint for global development is peppered with security-related capacity building, such as combating the proliferation and trafficking in arms, drugs and people, fighting environmental crime and safeguarding the global supply chain.

In practice, the forthcoming goals will require a huge, multi-decade undertaking in securing the key societal functions of borders, ports and airports. It will require advanced training and equipping of military and law enforcement agencies. Achieving the SDG will mean implementing strategic controls against illicit trade and delivering technological solutions to make these societies more efficient.

Indeed, the action necessary to achieve the forthcoming SDG's poverty-reduction goals coincides with

the military and security communities' priorities of keeping the nonproliferation of WMD in check through secure borders, ports and airports.

In this light, it is both unfair and unwise for development organizations to take on this burden alone. A wide range of national and international security organizations – from defense and homeland security organizations, U.S. regional commands, U.N. crime-fighting organizations, and even regional nonproliferation initiatives – all have an opportunity to assist and, in so doing, achieve meet some of their priorities in the process.

Development organizations and security oriented communities can work together to come up with creative approaches to mitigating development and security challenges in tandem. Local buy-in will be easier; and by pooling resources and sharing lessons learned, the international community can make sure each development and security objective is realized in a cost-effective manner.

Time for innovative thinking

In short, the world needs to confront an altogether different WMD proliferation environment. At no other point in history has the WMD supply chain run through more countries, regions and private sector hands. An increasing number of states, companies and even individuals now have the potential to innovate, manufacture, finance, transship, or otherwise contribute to the development of WMD.

In turn, WMD nonproliferation efforts need to increasingly focus on developing and emerging countries: societies and regions that are – for good reasons – focused on a different set of 'soft' security and development objectives.

Fortunately, there is an emerging agenda within the WMD, human security and development communities that recognizes that further integration between the actors is necessary. It currently offers our best hope of combatting the rapid proliferation of WMD while at the same time tackling some of the root causes of global poverty and instability. Bringing even more governments and multilateral organizations into the fold is essential.

For more information on issues and events that shape our world, please visit the [ISN Blog](#) or browse our [resources](#).

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