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A Nuclear Terrorism Report Card

Graham Allison

IN THE first debate of the 2004 presidential campaign, the moderator asked the two candidates: “What is the single most serious threat to American national security?” Both answered: nuclear terrorism. Vice President Dick Cheney followed up, arguing that “the biggest threat we face now as a nation is the possibility of terrorists ending up in the middle of one of our cities with deadlier weapons than have ever been used against us—nuclear weapons—able to threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans.” Cheney concluded: “That’s the ultimate threat. For us to have a strategy that is capable of defeating that threat, *you’ve got to get your mind around that concept.*” (Emphasis mine.)

Given these strong words, the question is: How has the administration acted to address this threat? Success in preventing a nuclear 9/11 requires implementing a “Doctrine of Three Nos”: no loose nukes, no new nascent nukes and no new nuclear weapons states. On all three fronts, the administration’s first-term performance can be summed up by one word: unacceptable.

“No loose nukes” means securing all nuclear weapons and weapons-usable material beyond the reach of terrorists and

criminals that might sell them on the black market. Hard as it is to believe, fewer potential nuclear weapons were secured in Russia in the two years after the 9/11 wake-up call than in the two years prior to that attack. Although the administration launched a global clean-out initiative that removed some highly enriched uranium from eight countries, the makings for nuclear bombs remain today in forty developing and transitional countries. Performance worthy of an “A” in securing “loose nukes” requires locking down all nuclear material in twelve to 18 months—not *mañana*.

“No new nascent nukes” means no new national capabilities to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium, the essential elements in creating nuclear weapons. The international security community has slowly come to recognize this red line: Highly enriched uranium and plutonium are bombs just about to hatch. On this front, the Bush Administration earned a “D minus.” While its attention was consumed by Iraq, Iran advanced from years to only months away from completing the infrastructure for its nuclear bomb.

“No new nuclear weapons states” recognizes the reality that we have now eight nuclear powers but says unambiguously:

	1 st Term Trend	Grade	2 nd Term Trend	Grade
No Loose Nukes	↓	D+	↑	?
No New Nascent Nukes	↓	D-	↔	?
No New Nuclear Weapons States	↓	F	↑	?

Shades of Yale?

“No more.” Sharply reducing Cold War arsenals and devaluing nuclear weapons in international relations are long-term goals, but the urgent challenge is to stop further bleeding. Here the president clearly failed. When he entered office, North Korea had two bombs-worth of plutonium (acquired in the final years of his father’s administration). At the end of his first term, according to CIA estimates, North Korea’s nuclear arsenal had grown to eight bombs-worth of plutonium.

Beginning in early 2003, North Korea crossed every line the United States has drawn. Specifically, it withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—with impunity. It kicked out the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors—with impunity. It turned off the video cameras that were watching 8,000 fuel rods containing enough plutonium for six additional bombs—with impunity. It trucked those fuel rods off to reprocessing factories, claimed to have manufactured nuclear weapons with the material, and restarted its reactor to make more plutonium—with impunity. Today, North Korea stands alone as a self-declared but unrecognized nuclear power.

In contrast to the first term, the good news is that in the past year the reconfigured Bush national security team appears

to be “getting its mind around the concept” of a nuclear bomb exploding in an American city. In confronting the threat of nuclear terrorism, the administration has moved beyond ideological principles to a new pragmatism.

In February 2005, at a summit in Bratislava, Presidents Bush and Putin put nuclear security at the top of the agenda. For the first time, the two presidents accepted personal responsibility for addressing the issue and assuring that their governments act urgently. They agreed on a work plan that assigned responsibility to Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman and his Russian counterpart; established specific working groups on best practices in nuclear security and security culture; and required the secretaries to oversee implementation of these efforts and brief them regularly.

On Iran, the administration has gotten off the sidelines where it was carping at the EU-3 initiative and has begun actively building consensus among the major parties—the EU-3, the United States, Russia and China—on the necessity of preventing Iran from completing its nuclear weapons infrastructure. In contrast to futile attempts to stop construction of the nuclear power plant at Bushehr or deny Iran’s asserted right to

a full fuel cycle, it now focuses on persuading the Iranian government to forgo specific actions at its Natanz and Isfahan facilities. Moreover, the United States is showing a willingness to bring additional carrots to the table, from airplane parts to promises of non-aggression.

It would be a grand irony—and indeed a tragedy—if the United States and Iran reverse roles. After a term in which American ideology scotched a denuclearization deal that Iran’s government might have accepted, the new Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, could prove unwilling to accept any offer the international community can assemble.

Addressing the North Korean threat, the administration has transcended the paralysis of the first term to develop a coherent strategy. The first-term policy was summarized in Vice President Cheney’s maxim: “We don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.” The administration is now actively negotiating. Significant financial inducements from Japan, South Korea and China, and a guarantee from the U.S. government that it will not attack North Korea to change its regime by force, persuaded Pyongyang to agree last September that it would “abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” Between that pledge and the reality of a non-nuclear North Korea lies a journey

of a thousand steps, many steeper and more slippery than the first. The fact that China, the state with the greatest leverage over North Korea, has become an active player in this process holds great promise.

Across the nuclear front, the administration currently confronts challenges as difficult as those faced by any American government since the Cuban Missile Crisis. We can be grateful for the recognition of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her colleagues of the reality of nuclear danger and their determination to mobilize all the sticks and carrots in the American arsenal to combat the threat. Where the stakes could mean terrorists exploding a nuclear weapon in an American city, Churchill’s counsel to colleagues in World War Two surely applies. “It is not enough”, he said, “to do one’s best. What is required is rather that one do what is necessary for success.” □

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Thinking Beyond States

Ian Bremmer

WHEN GOVERNMENT officials formulate foreign policy, they tend to focus their analytical resources on the opportunities and challenges created by other governments:

They coordinate policy with some states in order to overcome resistance from others. Officials at the State Department, for example, may soon be working to persuade allied countries to join the United