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Preventing a new dark age

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On May 8 an American citizen with alleged ties to the al-Qaeda terror network was arrested on suspicion of plotting to build and detonate a radioactive "dirty" bomb in the United States. On May 31, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda of Japan -- the emotional touchstone of antinuclear sentiments for having been the only country to suffer atomic-bomb attacks -- provoked an uproar by suggesting that Japan's ban on nuclear weapons could be reviewed. Over the same period, India and Pakistan raised the risk of a nuclear war to the greatest level since the U.S.-Russia Cuban Missile crisis of 1962.

Contemplation of these three alarms make it worth our while to examine the merits of setting up an international commission to propose a results-based set of measures to deal with the problem.

In retrospect, 1996 was the zenith of progress on arms control. The nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, or NPT, was indefinitely extended in 1995; the World Court affirmed the NPT's disarmament obligations in July 1996; and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, or CTBT, was approved in September. Unfortunately, events over the next six years dashed hopes for meaningful progress.

In the world of disarmament today, as applied to weapons of mass destruction, or WMD, there is little interest in reaching the benchmarks of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. We find ourselves once again at a familiar crossroads, confronting the same old choice between security based on deterrence or disarmament.

There is not much evidence of significant domestic political constituencies in the nuclear-armed states to get the disarmament train back on track. Recent trends, fueled by fears of terrorism since 9/11, seem to point to the advent of a new dark age for disarmament, including:

* Continued reliance on nuclear weapons and deterrence concepts;

* New nuclear weapons, perhaps in the form of "mininukes" or new warheads for use in missile-defense interceptors;

* New biological weapons, genetically engineered to resist defenses, to increase lethality or durability,

or to be used against inanimate objects such as asphalt, fuel and plastics;

* Erosion of nuclear-security assurances, enabling nuclear weapons to increasingly be used as threats against states without nuclear weapons;

* Significant increases in military spending (already at about 75 percent of the Cold War peak of 1985) and apprehensions of a growing global arms market;

* New risks that terrorists will acquire and use weapons of mass destruction;

* An unfettered race among many countries to acquire long-range missiles;

* Declining support from private foundations for nongovernment organizations working on disarmament.

It is time to consider establishing a new international commission on weapons of mass destruction. Its mandate should cover nuclear, biological and chemical weapons that the NPT, Biological Weapons Convention, and Chemical Weapons Convention have specifically targeted for total elimination. It should explicitly include both nonproliferation and disarmament -- for one cannot be sacrificed for the other without loss of credibility. It should also cover possible terrorist uses of the weapons and strategies to address such threats.

One approach would be to set up the commission as a special U.N. panel, like the Panel on U.N. Peace Operations, which produced the Brahimi Report. Another would be to have an independent commission. Consideration of the Brahimi Report within the U.N. system was assured even though acceptance of its recommendations depended on member states. The extra-U.N. commission should at some stage consult with the U.N. system through seminars and conferences to gauge reactions and maintain "reality checks" and visibility.

The commission could forward its conclusions in the form of a U.N. General Assembly document, thus ensuring that the work is the subject of discussions and speeches in relevant U.N. forums.

Having two cochairs, one each from the North and South, would be an asset in gaining legitimacy. It should be backed by a politically attuned advisory board, the capacity to undertake in-depth research, a secretariat for administrative support, and funding from like-minded governments and private foundations.

The commission should develop new ideas and explore their practical means of implementation, focusing on specific institutions in both the public and private sectors. It should look at the institutional and political bases of sustainable disarmament -- armament-reduction levels that assure the national security needs of today's states without threatening the security and development of other states and future generations. It should look closely at the technologies needed to verify the elimination of all WMDs and to prevent the development of new WMDs -- a task that amounts to a blueprint for a

"revolution in disarmament affairs."

It may also wish to explore how to bridge the "disarmament divide" -- where higher compliance standards apply to nonproliferation than to disarmament.

The commission's report could serve as an authoritative instrument for governments and NGOs alike in advocating greater progress on disarmament. It would come out in time to help ensure the success of the NPT Review Conference of 2005; failure would jeopardize the treaty itself. It could propose ideas on how to move forward in developing new international approaches to verify compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention; explore new approaches to expedite application of the CTBT; and provide a road map on how to deal with the threats of WMD terrorism without succumbing to overreaction or panic.

Thus the mandate of the commission should be both specific and general. Its report should not be a broad-brush portrayal of an ideal world devoid of any practical recommendations. Nor should it be so detailed and situation-specific that it's out of date when published.

The commission must not only be composed of world-renowned experts but also ensure an adequate balance of gender, geography and political viewpoints -- although too much consideration for the latter could create gridlock.

An efficient secretariat, a good research team, excellent writing skills and a good editorial pen are vital. Additionally, papers commissioned by outstanding experts in the field -- both academic scholars and experienced practitioners -- would considerably assist deliberations among commissioners.

The commission's report should have the support of a government acceptable to the world community. This does not mean the report should fall within the parameters of that government's foreign policy. Rather it should be a genuinely independent exploratory exercise.

Finally, follow-through is vital. This depends a lot, though not solely, on the energy that the sponsoring government is willing to invest in the commission's report.

Commissions need not all be "cul-de-sacs down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled." They could in fact -- like the Brundtland Commission with its focus on "sustainable development," or the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty with its innovative concept of the responsibility to protect -- lead to a breakthrough in conceptual thinking with practical policy implications.

Let us also look to a commission on WMD to launch a movement for sustainable disarmament that will sweep aside outmoded concepts and energize public opinion to move forward to a world free of weapons of mass destruction.

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