

B454. "Loose Nuclear Arms Are the Biggest Threat" International Herald Tribune (May 3, 2004), p. 8.

The confluence of the terrorist attack on Madrid's trains and the American presidential election is pushing the Bush administration further down the wrong road. It is focusing on garden-variety terrorists, especially Al Qaeda, while neglecting the black market in nuclear weapons and loose nuclear bombs that terrorists may commandeer. As horrible as the Sept. 11 and March 11 attacks were, the deaths that would result from the use of nuclear weapons by a terrorist group or rogue state would be much, much worse.

The first priority ought to be given to curbing the trade in such weapons, removing them from the arsenals of rogue states, and guarding them much more closely elsewhere.

But that is not what the United States and its allies are doing.

Nor are opponents to the Bush administration pushing it to do so. The Democrats have accused President George W. Bush of pursuing weapons of mass destruction at the expense of the hunt for terrorists.

The attacks on Madrid were also a reminder that two and half years after the Sept. 11 attacks, we are still far from extinguishing Al Qaeda.

Nowhere is this misguided focus on terrorism more apparent than in Pakistan. The United States has expended a lot of energy pushing President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan to hunt down terrorists in the treacherous tribal areas in the north.

Yet, at the same time, Washington has been relatively silent about the admission by Pakistan's former chief nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, that he sold nuclear designs and material to Libya and North Korea.

The United States pretends to have been convinced by the political theater of the absurd - whereby Khan agreed to take a symbolic spanking and then be immediately pardoned by the Musharraf government - as if the extensive and prolonged program of selling nuclear designs, material, and expertise were a one-person rogue operation that should no longer cause any concern.

Indeed, in the days that followed, the United States granted Pakistan a new elevated status, as a "major non-NATO ally," a standing enjoyed by only 12 other nations.

One yearns for the days when key elements of foreign policy had bipartisan backing and were not considered material for election dogfights.

If we Americans could retrieve even a bit of that spirit, we would agree on the opposite strategy to the one that is being followed: The United States should inform the Pakistani government that we will, for the time being, continue to ignore its lackluster attempts to help us find the remnants of the Taliban and Qaeda forces, its undemocratic nature (Musharraf came to power during a coup in 1999), and its abuse of human rights.

But Pakistan must immediately desist in feeding the global black market nuclear material, and accept that its experts work under close supervision, and above all, that its nuclear weapons be much more carefully guarded.

Focusing on nuclear weapons is more important in our dealings with Pakistan than with North Korea and Iran.

Compared to Pakistan, Iran and North Korea have relatively stable, if beleaguered, governments.

Terrorists are unlikely to walk away with nuclear bombs from these nations, unless the regimes so desire - and they know the bitter consequences of such a horrendous act.

In Pakistan, terrorists may get their hands on the bombs without the full collaboration of the central government, or after toppling it.

Our first priority ought to be to demand that our forces will be used to protect these weapons much more effectively; to warn that a high price will be exacted if they are sold to third parties.

In the longer run, the international community needs to work to resolve the Indian-Pakistani conflict and to guarantee the border between these nations so that Pakistan - which has much weaker conventional forces than India - will feel less of a need for a nuclear deterrent.

Meanwhile, we Americans better have Special Forces standing by to take possession of Pakistan's nuclear weapons on short notice if the Musharraf government is toppled, rather than have them end up in caves in the hands of Osama bin Laden and his associates.

The terrorists are simply the carriers; we should mind most what they may carry.