

THE REAL THREAT TO US IS NUCLEAR WEAPONS



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RECENT months have seen desperate attempts by the Western nations to stop North Korea and Iran joining the nuclear club. These two nations remain on George Bush's Axis of Evil – preventing nuclear missiles from getting into their hands is, we are told, the first priority of the War against Terror.

Meanwhile, politicians continue to warn that another major attack by terrorists is likely, if not inevitable. Since September 11, security has been dramatically stepped up at airports, rail stations and other vulnerable targets – at a huge cost but with doubtful benefits. Rings of steel and concrete are of little use against terrorists who succeed in breaching the defences with a nuclear bomb.

The scenario is not so unlikely. There are hundreds of tonnes of nuclear materials around the world, poorly guarded and vulnerable to theft or bribery by terrorists, that could be used to make a bomb.

Stopping North Korea and Iran is the least of our worries: more pressing are states such as Russia and Pakistan who cannot guarantee the absolute security of their weapons.

The damage that would be caused by a nuclear attack on London or Chicago hardly needs describing: in 1945, one single bomb – tiny compared to today's technology – obliterated the city of Hiroshima. Al Qaeda must, at all costs, be stopped from being able to do so. As one terrorist put it: "We just have to be lucky once. You have to be lucky every time."

The fear of conventional terrorist attacks has made Western leaders dangerously schizophrenic on this issue. Last year, the US government took the tactical decision to overlook

WE'VE GOT THIS WAR ON TERROR SO WRONG

reports that a Pakistani scientist was running a nuclear black market. At that time his country was providing valuable help in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden.

This is like letting a serial killer go free because he promised to help catch some drink-drivers. Terrorists armed with a nuclear bomb are more dangerous than a Bin Laden holed up in a cave.

Our other obsession – with Iraq and rogue states – has blinded us to the greater threat of nuclear terrorism. North Korea and Iran may be run by dictators with little love of the West but they are also extremely controlled societies, where the state keeps a close eye on its

scientists, military and security officers or anyone else tempted to sell a nuclear bomb to terrorists.

Even they would be extremely unlikely to risk national destruction with a nuclear attack on the US or Israel, provoking immediate and deadly retaliation.

Sadly, recent history has shown that suicide bombers cannot be swayed in this way.

It is insane that the West is still so casual about loose nukes. This year China helped Nigeria, one of the world's most corrupt and unstable states, to construct a reactor using highly enriched uranium (HEU) – the material from which terrorists could most readily build a nuclear bomb – to produce energy. This is like

giving a machine gun to a child and saying: "Make sure you keep the safety latch on." And there are an estimated 200 such HEU reactors around the world in failing or unstable states such as the Congo or Uzbekistan.

What is needed is a global strategy to erase the spectre of a nuclear attack by terrorists once and for all. Current non-proliferation treaties – which allow states to keep existing nuclear weapons and reactors, provided they submit to inspections – must be abandoned in favour of de-proliferation.

A NEW global safety authority should also be created, to remove nuclear materials from failing states. It would offer them economic incentives to give up their nuclear capability and alternative sources of cheap energy.

The body would be empowered to use military force if this failed, and to send an international force to secure the borders of vulnerable states that have agreed to give up their nuclear weapons.

Whoever is elected US President next week faces the urgent task, along with his British and other allies, of reviving the divided coalition against terror and shifting its focus away from the Iraq disaster and towards the real threat of nuclear weapons.

Instead of taking the war to the terrorists themselves, we should concentrate on making sure they cannot cause damage on a catastrophic scale – a nuclear scale. The consequences of failing to do so are too grim even to imagine.

● Professor Etzioni is a world expert on international relations and former adviser to the White House. Pre-empting Nuclear Terrorism In A New Global Order is published this week by the Foreign Policy Centre: www.fpc.org.uk

'States like Russia and Pakistan can't guarantee the security of their nukes'