

INTRODUCTION

How Real Is Nuclear Terrorism?

After the Cold War and nearly 70 years of waging war against communism, the United States and its key allies have adopted the war against terror as their new organizing principal. The king of terrorist threats, however, is nuclear terrorism. As Vice President Dick Cheney once argued, “if there is a one percent chance” of a terrorist developing a nuclear weapon, “we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.”¹

This raises the question, though, just how real is the threat of nuclear terrorism. This working paper presents two opposed views. The first is by Brian M. Jenkins, A RAND analyst and one of the world’s leading experts on nuclear terrorism. He argues that the threat of nuclear terrorism is overblown. He recommends officials see it as a lesser included threat to that of the acquisition and possible use of nuclear weapons by states. What we need to do to prevent states from getting nuclear weapons and to secure existing nuclear weapons and fissile materials against sabotage or illicit seizure will largely take care of the more distant prospect of terrorists making nuclear bombs.

A second and opposing view is offered by John Lauder, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Nonproliferation Center, who argues that the threat of nuclear terrorism is growing and we need to be hedging against this now.

It would be a mistake to think either of these views is wrong. The trick is figuring out which to emphasize and how much. This set of questions are worthy of discussion and debate.

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1. Michiko Kakutani, “Personality, Ideology and Bush’s Terror Wars,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 2006, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/books/20kaku.html?_r=0.