The Doctrine of Mutually Assured Support:
Preparing for a Terrorist Nuclear Attack

The darkest fear in the current struggle with terrorism is a nuclear bomb exploding in a major city. Such an attack would cause massive casualties, social dislocation, and economic disruption. Citizens in the attacked country could experience fundamental changes in their outlook on life, attitude toward the world, and confidence in their leaders.

Any country attacked by a nuclear weapon would feel extraordinary pressure to undertake a drastic response, one that will shape its future and that of the world. The September 11th attacks, with several thousand casualties and tens of billions of dollars in losses, set the stage for the Iraq War. Its costs approximate those of a moderate-sized nuclear explosion. The response to such an attack might be proportionately larger, and include bombing or invading countries suspected of active collaboration or complicity.

The pressure to “shoot first and ask questions afterwards” presages a cataclysmically ineffective response. Acting on the basis of limited knowledge, the attacked country may inflict enormous collateral damage, without achieving its critical goals: bringing the perpetrators to justice and preventing additional attacks. Seemingly indiscriminate responses will play into the terrorists’ hands, by mobilizing those who feel unjustly injured or accused by the response.

All other countries have a vested interest in having the attacked country achieve its goals as effectively as possible. They want to minimize needless damage to their own country. They want to keep the response from spilling over to less worthy aims, like using the attack to settle old scores. They want to show solidarity, in order to deny terrorists the victory of dividing the civilized world.

However, they cannot expect the attacked country to work with them, unless that collaboration promises to achieve its goals more effectively than it can on its own. In principle, that should be possible. Determined multilateral pursuit should leave terrorists with no place to hide. In practice, though, an effective response cannot be improvised after an attack. It requires complex technical planning, coordinating law enforcement agencies around the world. It also requires diplomatic coordination, among countries that may disagree on many other topics, including the sources of terrorism.

Thus, the international community faces an urgent need for a multilateral agreement, promising Mutually Assured Support: In the event of a nuclear attack, all parties to that agreement would mobilize all their resources, in order to bring swift, harsh justice to the terrorists and their supporters. In return for that support, the attacked country would refrain from unilateral actions infringing on their sovereignty.

Making that deal attractive will, likely, require other nations to surrender some of that sovereignty voluntarily. For example, they may need to allow the attacked country’s agents to work on their soil or to extradite suspects to countries with interrogation
procedures or punishments that they find unacceptable.

These would be deeply painful concessions, even among countries that otherwise trust one another. The difficulties are more acute when nations are divided over essential aspects of the general struggle against terrorism, including whether some groups are terrorists (rather than freedom fighters) and how appropriate are some measures (like the war in Iraq).

As a result, it is not surprising that no such multilateral agreement is currently under discussion. However, without it, terrorists have a greater chance getting away with mass murder and triggering a spiral of carnage – just as they hope. Not having an agreement sacrifices its deterrent potential. It might even embolden terrorists, by showing them that the “corrupt” nation-states cannot unite, even for cataclysmic threats.

Although understandable, this inertia is unacceptable. Nations must be able to address this extreme threat, while agreeing to disagree on anything else. Deliberations must begin immediately, regarding what all countries will do, should any one of them suffer a nuclear weapons attack, and what the attacked country will refrain from doing, if it receives suitable support.

Those deliberations need not reach a signed treaty, in order to have a stabilizing effect. Just starting them will show the dire threat posed by a terrorist nuclear weapon and the response to its use. Once begun, the talks should become too important to fail.

Sustaining the talks should require taking steps with salutary effects of their own. For example, creating the hot lines needed for an emergency should open communication channels between countries. Defining collaborators broadly should dissuade potential supporters, who cannot know when, say, a financial contribution might link them to a heinous war crime and subject them to an international dragnet.

The closer that the parties can come to a complete agreement, the greater are the chances that they can bridge the final gaps, following an attack. Indeed, when nations are intensely divided on other issues, a prior signed agreement may be politically infeasible. Their goal has to be building enough mutual confidence to be able to put aside other issues, if the acute need arises.

Nations that cannot undertake and stay this course deserve the world’s condemnation. In the Cold War, the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction dealt with the possibility of there being no tomorrow, after a massive nuclear attack. After even the worst imagined terrorist nuclear attack, the vast majority of people will still be alive, even in the attacked country. All nations will be judged by their responses – and their preparations.

In order to guide this process, we propose doctrine of Mutually Assured Support. It creates incentives for actions that reduce participating countries’ physical risks, while enhancing their standing in the ideological battlefield that determines support for
terrorists. The doctrine commits all parties to mobilize all resources in order to (a) apprehend and punish all those involved with an attack and (b) prevent additional ones. All nations fulfilling these obligations, to the satisfaction of the attacked country would be safe from retaliatory action. This doctrine addresses the undeniable rights of an attacked country better than it can by itself, as well as the deepest fears of other countries. The process of its adoption should build confidence and security.

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