

The Lessons from India's Nuclear Tests

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Mr. Chairman, we have important lessons to learn from India's most recent series of nuclear weapons tests.

The first lesson is about our intelligence capability -- or rather, about our expectations that our fine intelligence services are so omniscient that the United States will not have to wake up to unpleasant surprises from time to time. To be sure, I agree with the deep concern expressed by Senator Richard Shelby and other members of Congress that in this instance we did not take advantage of long-term strategic warning to use our capabilities for timely tactical warning. But that is an old story, it goes back to Pearl Harbor.

A more important aspect of the intelligence lesson, I believe, is our difficulty to respond to strategic warning, not necessarily by trying to prevent every untoward happening -- we are not so omnipotent -- but by being prepared to cope with the calamity when it occurs. We now have strategic warning, plenty of it, that among the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons left behind by the former Soviet Union, one (or more) might be diverted by theft, by accident, or a combination of mishaps, and then begin a journey -- by ship, by airplane, or other means -- that ends in our country. We do have the strategic warning now! But we are woefully unprepared. Likewise, for similar warnings about biological weapons.

Our reliance on precise intelligence warnings must not become an excuse for being unprepared should the feared event, one morning, come as a surprise.

The second lesson to be learned, or re-learned, Mr. Chairman, is the inseparable entanglement of military and peaceful uses of nearly all important technologies. Highpower computers can be used for weather predictions, medical research -- and to perfect nuclear weapons. Plutonium can be used to fuel nuclear reactors and to build bombs. There is ample evidence that India's nuclear weapons capability was greatly accelerated and enhanced by the assistance on "peaceful" nuclear technology that India received since the 1950s from Canada, the United States, and other countries. (This is not to belittle the great competence of Indian scientists and engineers).

In typical American lawyerly fashion, we ask the nations to whom we sell or donate these technologies to sign a piece of paper promising they won't divert the technology to make weapons. With countries that are truly determined to misuse the technology, the piece of paper will not help much. And elaborate international inspection regimes to back up such

promises can always be circumvented, especially by the most dangerous and secretive regimes like Iraq and North Korea, but even by an open democracy -- as we discovered in 1974 when India exploded a nuclear bomb it called "peaceful."

This lesson is particularly serious for biological technology, where the most beneficial peaceful uses and the most evil weapons uses are much more intertwined than in nuclear technology. Yet, with a triumph of hope over experience, we keep repeating the same mistake. In this year's State of the Union address, President Clinton told Congress that he is seeking a treaty to verify the existing ban on biological weapons and thus to "enforce" the ban. The Clinton Administration's proposal here provides for no enforcement whatsoever, and the verification envisaged -- every competent scientist will tell you -- cannot work.

This leads to the third lesson, that the global spread of technology is a force far too powerful, too elemental, to be stopped with dikes and darns built with the parchment of arms control treaties. Sometimes these treaties help to reinforce and keep on track good intentions. But they can be by-passed even by relatively friendly countries, and can be violated -- usually with impunity -- by dictatorships. We did not punish North Korea for violating the Non-Proliferation Treaty it had signed. The Clinton Administration rewarded North Korea with the gift of oil deliveries (which Congress is being asked to pay for) and with the gift of two new nuclear reactors (which the Administration presses our allies to pay for).

Now my last point -- the lessons we ought to teach. If halting nuclear proliferation was as high a priority for the United States as the talk and complaining here in town pretends, the United States would seek to convince other countries intent on nuclear arms that acquiring these arms costs more than it is worth. Instead we purchase ambiguous promises from these countries by offering handsome gifts. We purchased an ambiguous promise from North Korea to halt their illicit bomb program with the billion dollar gifts I just mentioned. My prediction, Mr. Chairman, is that we will do the same for India. The Administration will seek to minimize the impact of the economic sanctions (mandated in 1994 by Congress); and Congress will come under fierce pressure from the business community to wink and to blink. The President, as he has already announced, will try to cajole India into signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Perhaps some compromise in the treaty language will be offered to New Delhi; a compromise sweetened with new U.S. computer sales to India, more U.S. technical assistance, more aid. And when this treaty is signed by India, it will be presented by the White House press office as a victory over proliferation.

And, by the way, we will have taught a lesson to Pakistan, to Iran, to every aspirant for building some nuclear bombs. Go ahead! Carefully design a series of five or seven tests and let the American tongue-lashing roll over you. Then sign the Comprehensive Test Ban. Hold out the tin cup for U.S. aid, Japanese aid, European aid; and make the donations pile in by going along with the charade that this Test Ban will somehow prevent you from building an arsenal of the weapons you just tested.

Let me not end, however, on so pessimistic a note. Nuclear proliferation has been slowed down significantly by American policy since the beginning of the nuclear age. Each administration has contributed some successes and some mistakes to this long-term policy. Let's learn from the mistakes to enhance our success rate.