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Threat Convergence and International Cooperation: Indicators and Challenges

By Rita Grossman-Vermaas

June 16, 2011

This is a paper from the Nautilus Institute workshop [“Cooperation to Control Non-State Nuclear Proliferation: Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction and UN Resolutions 1540 and 1373”](#) held on April 4th and 5th in Washington DC with the Stanley Foundation and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This workshop explored the theoretical options and practical pathways to extend states' control over non-state actor nuclear proliferation through the use of extra-territorial jurisdiction and international legal cooperation.

Other papers and presentations from the workshop are available [here](#).

Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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I. Introduction

Rita Grossman-Vermaas, Senior International Policy Advisor in the Persistent Surveillance Division at Logos Technologies, provides an overview of what threat convergence is and the opportunities for international cooperation to mitigate the security challenges it presents.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on significant topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Rita Grossman-Vermaas

- Threat Convergence and International Cooperation: Indicators and Challenges

By Rita Grossman-Vermaas [\[1\]](#)

Since the end of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear terrorism has loomed large on the minds of arms controllers and policymakers. But, to date - 20 years later- there is neither a coherent nor comprehensive approach to the challenges of nuclear trafficking and terrorism. Part of the difficulty is getting a handle on the numerous pathways through which nuclear trafficking could occur, and thinking through how to comprehensively deal with them. Nevertheless, such an exercise is critical to deterring and preventing a nuclear event. One way to begin the process is to have a better understanding of the environments in which nuclear trafficking, proliferation, and terrorism could be facilitated. Many potential areas of concern are in regions that are fragile or may be in active conflict. Thus, there must be a recognition, and incorporation into the nonproliferation thinking, of the role of fragile environments in facilitating or enabling nuclear trafficking and proliferation.

For the purposes of this briefing, threat convergence is defined as the intersection among terrorism, WMD proliferation and fragile environments. To date, research in five regions has been conducted to examine the vulnerabilities that non-state entities might exploit to acquire, proliferate or traffic in nuclear materials. These include:

- Black Sea (2007)
- South Caucasus (2008)
- Tri-border Area (TBA), South America (2007)
- East Africa (2009)
- West Africa (2010) [\[2\]](#)

Based on independent research, field work, and interviews with experts and officials from national governments, foreign diplomatic missions, international organizations, as well as US and foreign academics, journalists and international observers working on issues related to counter-terrorism, nuclear nonproliferation and/or regional security, a series of common characteristics - or indicators - of threat convergence have been identified across these regions. These include:

- Weak governance and institutional capacities
- Border insecurity

- Organized crime
- Corruption
- Illicit trafficking in arms, drugs and other contraband

All of these challenges raise barriers to effective legal action, institutions, and related counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation efforts. For instance, the TBA is an infamous hub of illicit – including terrorist- activity on the continent, and is described by former intelligence officials as an environment in which ‘predation rules’. [3] In the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions, where regional tensions are rife, efforts have been taken to improve the rule of law, border security, counter-terrorism and nuclear security capacities, but areas of weakness remain. These include corruption and low morale in the border security services. [4] Finally, in East Africa, strained capacities on infrastructure and governance facilitate the relative openness in terms of cross-border movements. There are also significant capacity restraints to deal with border management, counter-terrorism, and the control and security of radiological material and nuclear facilities. [5]

There are initiatives to deal with these challenges around the world, but they are rarely coordinated with WMD proliferation and terrorism prevention efforts at both the strategic and operational levels; and at national and international levels. Such coordination would enhance opportunities for program effectiveness, leveraging, and ultimately, for successfully preventing the threat of illicit nuclear proliferation. There are, of course, existing frameworks under which coordination could occur – UNSCR 1540 and UNSCR 1373 are but two examples. But, the political and bureaucratic will to facilitate coordination must continue to be fostered, as well as ensuring that a regionally-appropriate strategy is tailored to each case.

From the preliminary research in each of these regions, the common theme that is continually reinforced is that fragile environments can be, and are, exploited for illicit nuclear trafficking. Each region has its unique types of vulnerabilities that must be appropriately addressed, but there are a few overarching themes that are worth highlighting. Nearly all of them relate to capacity-building, as well as the need to meet local security priorities that will also minimize nuclear smuggling and proliferation threats. For example,

1. There is a need to strengthen fissile material security around the globe. This was reinforced by US and international officials, including the IAEA.
2. Within particular regions, states have uneven capacities and priorities for national security, intelligence and border security relative to each other. Strengthening a range of related institutional capacities to deal with proliferation is critical to addressing the triple threat of proliferation, terrorism and instability—three of the greatest global security challenges we face today. This includes better detection and monitoring across borders; including nonproliferation awareness and initiatives in border security/counterterrorism assistance and training; prioritizing regions of concern; and a better understanding of the connections between networks and different commodity trades.
3. Existing mechanisms for regional security cooperation should be strengthened and better leveraged.
4. Crime, corruption, conflict and radicalism are the most common enablers of trafficking. In all countries and regions discussed, national and international authorities need to foster a culture of accountability in order to combat these risk factors and the potential for nuclear trafficking.
5. There needs to be a more nuanced understanding of the political, social and financial organization

of non-state networks of interest and their relationships with other illicit actors - including their motivations, objectives, and risk tolerance. This would lead to a better understanding of intelligence needs and opportunities for intra- and international cooperation. However, at the same time, the basic bureaucratic challenges to intelligence sharing must not be overlooked.

6. Finally, and most importantly, there needs to be better coordination - at the US interagency level, regionally and internationally. This need has been repeatedly identified by US officials, as well as independent analysts, and is critical for effective and sustainable efforts against illicit nuclear trafficking.

III. References

[1] Opinions expressed in this paper represent those of the author, and not necessarily those of Logos Technologies.

[2] Field research from 2007-2010 was conducted by The Center for the Study of Threat Convergence at The Fund for Peace. The author took part in work conducted on the TBA, East Africa and West Africa. Please see www.fundforpeace.org/tc for reports and related publications on each region.

[3] Patricia Taft, David Poplack and Rita Grossman-Vermaas, 'The Crime-Terrorism Nexus: Threat Convergence Risks in the Tri-Border Area', The Fund for Peace, 2009.

[4] Patricia Taft and David Poplack, 'The Sum of its Conflicted Parts: Threat Convergence Risks in the Black Sea Region', The Fund for Peace, January 2008; Rita Grossman-Vermaas, David Poplack and Joelle Burbank, 'Completing the Circle: Threat Convergence Risks in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea Regions,' The Fund for Peace, August 2009.

[5] Rita Grossman-Vermaas, Konrad Huber and Alexandra Kapitanskaya, 'Minimizing Threat Convergence Risks in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, The Fund for Peace, May 2010.

IV. Nautilus invites your responsesThe Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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