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Trends. Countering the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Just Whistling in the Dark

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How to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction? One approach--ideal and unattainable--is to interdict all relevant technology, materiel, and personnel before they reach locations in which illicit programs are being developed. Better yet is to keep technology, materiel, and personnel from even leaving "safe and secure" areas. Even better is to keep technology, materiel, and personnel from even being developed--except that the genie is already out of the bottle.

The plain truth is that all proliferation-supporting activities cannot be stopped or even identified and monitored. Assets just are not capable and available enough. And the motivation and will to counter proliferation are lacking among some governments and organizations--and representatives and constituents of these governments and organizations.

So, governments and organizations that seek to counter proliferation must make choices--what and who to go after with limited assets. The behavioral intention--the intent to deploy and/or employ weapons of mass destruction--coupled with the growing means to deploy and/or employ them often serves as a tripwire or clarion call.

Unfortunately, gauging behavioral intention seems prohibitively difficult. Expressing behavioral intent through words or inferring such intent through past and present action, inferred ideology, or assumed propensities are fraught with error. Moreover, the lessons that would be proliferators learn from the treatment of proliferation violators is that one probably won't get caught until proliferation is a fait accompli and if one does get caught, sanctions will be nonexistent, minor, transient, or gradually slipped.

So those who seek to counter proliferation are doomed to failure. But perhaps the quest is but a strategy--unintended or not--to maintain levels of terror below that of employment. In essence the tripwire of the behavioral intention is merely a characteristic of the tripwire of countering proliferation. It is as if maintaining efforts at a Sisyphean task is judged to be the best deterrent of employment. As if everyone pretends that the Sisyphean task is not Sisyphean so that deterrence of employment may hold even if proliferation does not. (Yet this phenomenon seems to be becoming less and less valid with non-state actors even as it continues to have its boundaries covertly tested by entities affiliated with other nation-states.)

Magical thinking usually elicits disparaging attributions in the world of psychiatry. In the world of thinking the unthinkable, however, what seems "crazy" may somehow be the sanest response to an insane situation. (See Bergler, E. (1947). "Crime and Punishment": Why punishment fails to prevent crime. Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement, 21, 263-303; Davis, R.H. (1966). The international influence process: How relevant is the contribution of psychologists? American Psychologist, 21, 236-243; Milburn, T.W. (1961). The concept of deterrence: Some logical and psychological considerations. Journal of Social Issue, 17, 3-11; Paternoster, R., & Piquero, A. (1995). Reconceptualizing deterrence: An empirical test of personal and vicarious experiences. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 23, 251-286.) (Keywords: Proliferation, Weapons of Mass Destruction, WMD.)