

The Australian



A nuclear threat we cannot ignore

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BARACK Obama sounds at his best when he channels George W. Bush. This week, at his nuclear summit, Obama has been tackling two issues deeply familiar to Bush: Iran's nuclear ambitions and nuclear terrorism. On Iran, Obama is making almost no progress. He comes out of meetings with Russia's Dmitry Medvedev or China's Hu Jintao and says he's got the Russians or the Chinese lined up to approve tough sanctions against Iran, but then Russian and Chinese officials tell the press that isn't so.

The purpose of sanctions on Iran is twofold: to put political pressure on Tehran to change course and to physically slow down its ability to import nuclear weapons ingredients. There used to be a third purpose: to show every option had been exhausted before military action was taken against Iran's nuclear facilities. But now it is impossible to imagine Obama taking such action. It is just possible Moscow and Beijing may allow Obama another golden TV moment by approving some kind of sanctions package at the UN Security Council, but these will be too weak to have much effect.

Obama's summit has done its best work on nuclear terrorism. As is usually the case with Obama, there is a little less than meets the eye. A lot of the actions are symbolic or don't start for some years. But there is some real effort to eliminate unnecessary plutonium and highly enriched uranium, which would be the building blocks for a terrorist nuclear device.

When the US Nuclear Posture Review was released last week, Obama said: "The greatest threat to US and global security is no longer a nuclear exchange between nations but nuclear terrorism by violent extremists."

This is where Obama is most channelling Bush and most making sense. Unlike much that politicians say, this is a genuinely important declaration by Obama and one that should change the debate in Australia. For Obama has embraced the Bush conception of the importance of the war on terror.

Bush famously declared he would not let the most dangerous people in the world threaten America and its allies with the most dangerous weapons in the world. He was derided by all bien-pensant opinion, not least in Australia, for linking the issues of terrorism and nuclear weapons at all. It was often intoned on our television and radio that the terrorists couldn't get nukes: they're too hard to make, no state would sell them, the terrorists don't even want to get them, and so on.

Whenever ABC1's Lateline seeks out an Australian response to the ramifications of global terrorism it inevitably turns to Hugh White, a professor at the Australian National University. He always preaches the same sermon on terrorism, and on Lateline White's sermons are never challenged. White's orthodoxy is that terrorism is not serious enough to be considered a strategic issue. The second part of his sermon is that we are not involved in Afghanistan because of anything to do with terrorism.

White preached this sermon most recently on Lateline in response to the Rudd government's white paper on terrorism.

It is of course a failure of Lateline, and a demonstration of the paradigm paralysis of the strategic types at the ANU, that this nearly insane orthodoxy is the best they can come up with. Clearly, Obama has not taken a strategic studies course at the ANU, for which much thanks.

Australia's academic investment in terrorism has yielded little value for money. There has been some good work done by country specialists, but courses dealing with terrorism have often been captured by root-causes types, don't demonise "the other" types and theoreticians of no practical value at all. Serious study of what the terrorists are actually doing happens very little in Australia. The names that dominate debate about Southeast Asian terrorists, such as Sidney Jones, Rohan Gunaratna and Zachary Abuza, are not based at Australian institutions.

I have had a few criticisms to make of Obama recently, but I certainly rate him a long way ahead of Australian academics in understanding the threat of global terrorism.

A good background to the general threat of nuclear terrorism is available in the January-February issue of the US journal *Foreign Affairs*, in a piece by Graham Allison.

Allison argues the threat that terrorists could buy or steal key nuclear weapons ingredients from Pakistan or North Korea is real. He notes the penetration of the Pakistan government's military headquarters by Taliban terrorists wearing Pakistan Army uniforms last year and asks how unthinkable is it that this could happen at a Pakistani nuclear weapons facility.

US speakers around Obama's summit have stressed how much effort al-Qa'ida, when it was based semi-openly in Afghanistan, was making on assembling a crude nuclear device.

Preventing al-Qa'ida from again having that kind of freedom of action within Afghanistan is the core strategic interest of the Western coalition, including Australia, in Afghanistan, though you'd never guess it from listening to the Australian strategic debate beyond the Rudd government's own official statements.

Allison argues that terrorists getting hold of even one nuclear device would "change the world. It would transform life in cities, shrink what are now regarded as essential civil liberties and alter conceptions of a viable nuclear order."

Al-Qa'ida has absorbed tremendous blows in Afghanistan, and more recently in Pakistan, and that has greatly weakened its ability to conduct sophisticated operations.

At the same time it is gaining recruits in Africa and parts of the Middle East, though generally recruits at a lower level of technical capability.

In other ways, the global terror network is growing more menacing. As the Rudd government's white paper on terrorism noted, Hezbollah is now a very widely spread international terrorist network, with a great deal of technical capability and a serious presence in Australia, and could be expected to strike at many targets if conflict with Iran broke out. And finally, Western security forces are worried about the increasingly global ambitions of Lashkar-e-Toiba, which in Mumbai carried out an operation of immense technical sophistication. LeT has a long record of trying to perpetrate terrorist attacks within Australia. Obama is right to draw all our attention to this overwhelmingly important strategic challenge.

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