Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

Security Threats to the United States

Statement of

Thomas Fingar
Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research

February 16, 2005

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence
Security Threats to the United States
February 16, 2005

Statement of
Thomas Fingar
Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research

Mister Chairman, Members of the Committee. It is an honor to be asked to participate in this important review of threats to our nation and the challenges they present to the Intelligence Community. INR has taken to heart your admonition to describe the spectrum of threats to the United States and its interests, and to assess the probability, immediacy, and severity of the dangers we face, but I will do so in a way intended to complement the judgments presented by our colleagues in other agencies by focusing on the way threats appear when viewed through the lens of diplomacy.

The subject of this hearing is one on which there is broad consensus in the Intelligence Community. INR concurs with the judgment that terrorism is the single greatest threat to Americans, both at home and abroad, and that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), missiles, and certain types of advanced conventional weapons is a close and dangerous second. We also share most of the other threat judgments presented by our colleagues. But rather than merely echoing their assessments, I will approach the subject reflecting INR's unique perspective and responsibilities as the Secretary of State's in-house intelligence unit.

As Secretary Rice has made clear in recent statements, diplomacy is critical to US efforts to contain, counter, and diminish the threats we face. On February 8 she told her audience in Paris, "We agree on the interwoven threats we face today: terrorism, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and regional conflicts, and failed states, and organized crime." She added that America stands ready to work with other countries in "building an even stronger partnership" to address these threats.

To combat the twin scourges of terrorism and proliferation requires more than just the effective collection of hard to obtain intelligence. At a minimum, it also requires deep understanding of the motivations and objectives of those who resort to terrorism and/or pursue WMD. It also takes sophisticated analysis of all-source information, informed judgments about what we do not know, and detailed knowledge of other countries, cultures, political systems, and the underlying causes of discontent and radicalization. The prerequisites for meeting all these requirements include global coverage, deep analytical expertise, and Intelligence Community commitment to providing policymakers what they need, when they need it, and in a form that they can use day in and day out.

Why are terrorism and proliferation at the top of the threat list? The short and conventional answer is that the normalization of relations with China and demise of the

Soviet Union dramatically reduced the danger of nuclear war and eliminated or transformed fundamentally a wide array of associated threats. But the end of the Cold War also brought many changes to other aspects of international life, including the erosion of constraints on "client" states, the reemergence of long repressed political aspirations, and the rise of ethnic and religious hatreds. Former DCI Jim Woolsey described the change as the displacement of a few big dragons by lots of dangerous snakes. But it was, and is, more than that. Globalization and the information revolution have changed expectations and aspirations and made it possible for nations and non-state actors, including individuals, to do things that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

One of the many resultant developments has been the emergence of vast differences in coercive capabilities. This, in turn, has exacerbated the dangers of both terrorism and proliferation. The inability of all but a few nations to deter the most powerful countries (including but not limited to the United States) has reinforced the determination of states that feel threatened (whether justifiably or not) to seek asymmetric solutions to the disparity of power. For some, this means pursuit of WMD and delivery capabilities because they know they have no hope of deterring or defeating the attacks they fear with conventional armaments. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this can be found in DPRK public statements after Operation Iraqi Freedom intended to reassure its public and warn potential adversaries that, unlike Saddam, it had a (nuclear) deterrent; a claim reiterated February 10. Pakistan pursued—and obtained—nuclear weapons and delivery systems to compensate for India's vastly superior conventional military power and nuclear weapons.

Terrorism is at the other end of the spectrum of asymmetric responses. State sponsors, most notably Iran, seem implicitly to warn potential enemies that the response to any attack will include resort to terror. They seem to be saying, in effect, "You may be able to defeat us militarily, but you cannot protect all your people, everywhere, all the time." Such a porcupine defense/deterrent posture is an unfortunate but not irrational response to wide disparities of power. The situation is somewhat analogous for non-state actors frustrated by their inability to achieve their (however reprehensible) goals by other means. Terror and guerrilla warfare are long-standing measures of choice (or last resort) for weak actors confronting a much stronger adversary. The targets vary widely, from established democracies to authoritarian regimes. However, in some cases, terrorists also direct their attacks against those who are seen as responsible for—by imposition or support—the actions or existence of the regime they oppose. That appears to be one of the reasons al-Qaida has targeted the United States in Saudi Arabia and terrorists in Iraq have used suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices to attack Iraqis and others supportive of the Iraqi government. The use of terror tactics in liberal democracies is especially problematic because in open societies, self-restraint under the rule of law and commitment to respect human rights and dignity complicate the challenges of mounting an effective response.

Attacking a distant country is difficult, even in the era of globalization, and would-be assailants must choose between difficult, high profile attacks, like those on

9/11, and easier to accomplish but probably lower impact incidents (like sniper attacks on random individuals or small explosions in crowded public places). We remain vulnerable to both types of terror attack, but arguably we are now less vulnerable to relatively large-scale, high profile attacks than we were before 9/11. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to penetrate the tight-knit groups that are most capable of carrying out such attacks on our country and our people. We have achieved great success in disrupting al-Qaida but may be witnessing a repeat of the pattern found in the wars on illegal drugs and organized crime, namely, that we are fighting a "hydra" with robust capabilities of resurgence and replacement of lost operatives. The bottom line is that terrorism remains the most immediate, dangerous, and difficult security challenge facing our country and the international community and is likely to remain so for a long time. Despite the progress we have made, it would be imprudent to become complacent or to lower our guard.

The quest for WMD, missiles (or unmanned aerial vehicles), and advanced conventional arms has become more attractive to, and more feasible for, a small but significant set of state and non-state actors. This poses major challenges to the security of the United States and our friends and allies, but it is important to put this threat in perspective.

Nuclear Threats. The nuclear sword of Damocles that hung over our national existence during the Cold War remains largely a concern from a different era. Russia and China still have nuclear weapons (the number is declining in Russia and increasing only modestly in China), but the hostility of the past is no longer a pressing concern and neither threatens to use them against our country. North Korea has produced sufficient fissile material to make a small number of nuclear weapons, but, despite its February 10 statement, there is no evidence that it has produced such weapons and mated them to a missile capable of delivering them to the United States. However, if it has made such weapons, it could reach US allies, our armed forces, and large concentrations of American citizens in Northeast Asia. India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and the capability to deliver them to targets in the region, but both nations are friends and neither threatens the territory of the United States. Iran seeks but does not yet have nuclear weapons or missiles capable of reaching the United States. INR's net assessment of the threat to US territory posed by nuclear weapons controlled by nation states is that it is low and lacks immediacy. But this should not be grounds for complacency. The existence of such weapons and the means to deliver them constitutes a latent but deadly threat. Ensuring that it remains latent is a key diplomatic priority.

The so far theoretical possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists constitutes a very different type of threat. We have seen no persuasive evidence that al-Qaida has obtained fissile material or ever has had a serious and sustained program to do so. At worst, the group possesses small amounts of radiological material that could be used to fabricate a radiological dispersion device ("dirty bomb"). The only practical way for non-state actors to obtain sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon (as opposed to material for a so-called dirty bomb) would be to acquire it on the black market or to steal it from one of the current, want-to-be, or used-to-be nuclear weapons

states. The "loose nukes" problem in the former Soviet Union continues to exist but is less acute than it once was, thanks to the Nunn-Lugar cooperative threat reduction program and diligent efforts by Russia to consolidate and protect stockpiles. North Korea's possession of weapons-grade fissile material adds a new layer of danger and uncertainty. There is no convincing evidence that the DPRK has ever sold, given, or even offered to transfer such material to any state or non-state actor, but we cannot assume that it would never do so.

Chemical and Biological Weapons. Despite the diffusion of know-how and dual-use capabilities to an ever-increasing number of countries, the number of states with known or suspected CW programs remains both small and stable. Most of those that possess such weapons or have the capability to produce quantities sufficient to constitute a genuine threat to the United States or Americans (civilian and military) outside our borders are not hostile to us, appreciate the significance of our nuclear and conventional arsenals, and are unlikely to transfer such weapons or capabilities to terrorists. There are nations that might use CW against invading troops, even American forces, on their own territory, but we judge it highly unlikely that nation states would use CW against the American homeland or specifically target American citizens except as an act of desperation. Terrorists, by contrast, have or could acquire the capability to produce small quantities of chemical agents for use against selected targets or random individuals. We judge the chances of their doing so as moderate to high. One or a few disgruntled individuals or a small terrorist cell could do so in a manner analogous to the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack on a Tokyo subway. The severity of such an attack would be small in terms of lethality, but the psychological and political impact would be huge.

The risk posed by nation states with biological weapons is similar to that for CW; many nations have the capability, but few have programs and even fewer would be tempted to use them against the United States. The danger of acquisition and use by terrorists, however, is far greater. Though hard to handle safely and even harder to deliver effectively, BW agents have the potential to overwhelm response capabilities in specific locations, induce widespread panic, and disrupt ordinary life for a protracted period, with resulting economic and social consequences of uncertain magnitude.

Conventional Attack. INR considers the danger of a conventional military attack on the United States or American military, diplomatic, or business facilities abroad to be very low for the simple reason that no state hostile to the United States has the military capability to attack the US with any hope of avoiding massive retaliation and ultimate, probably rapid, annihilation. The only way to reach a different conclusion, it seems to us, is to posit an irrational actor model in which either all key decisionmakers in a hostile country are irrational or there are no systemic constraints on a totally irrational dictator. We judge that such conditions exist nowhere at present and hence that US military might is, and will be, able to deter any such suicidal adventure for the foreseeable future. Here again, ensuring that this situation continues is a major goal of American diplomacy.

A far more dangerous threat is the possibility, even the likelihood, that advanced conventional weapons will be obtained—and used—by terrorists. For example, the

danger that groups or individuals antithetical to the United States will obtain MANPADs or advanced explosives is both high and immediate. The number of Americans likely to be killed or maimed in such an attack would be small in comparison with the casualties in a conventional war or nuclear attack, but would be unacceptably large no matter how small the number of casualties and could have a major economic and psychological impact. Attacks on American nationals, whether they are aimed at workers in an American city, American tourists abroad, US diplomatic facilities, US businesses at home or abroad, or US military facilities at home or abroad, are possible and unacceptable. The fact that State Department personnel, family members, and facilities have been frequent targets of attack makes us acutely aware of this danger and determined to do everything possible to thwart it. This determination is magnified several-fold by the fact that it is an important part of the State Department's mission, and the Secretary of State's responsibility, to protect American citizens everywhere around the globe. We take this responsibility very seriously, and an important part of INR's support to diplomacy involves providing information and insights that contribute directly to the success of this mission.

States of Concern. It has become something of a convention in threat testimony to list a number of countries that, for one reason or another, are judged to warrant special attention from the Intelligence Community. A few countries on this list engage in activities that directly or indirectly threaten American lives (e.g., North Korea's deployment of massive military power close enough to Seoul to put at risk our ally as well as American troops and tens of thousands of American civilians). Most countries on the list do not threaten the United States militarily but are important to the success of policies to protect and promote other American interests.

Rather than enumerate a long list of countries, I will simply provide a series of generic examples to illustrate the kinds of conditions and concerns germane to diplomatic efforts to protect and advance American interests. The State Department needs good intelligence on some countries primarily because their actions could lead to internal instability that could, in turn, threaten other American interests. Others belong on the list because they do not or cannot prevent the growth and export of narcotics, harbor or assist terrorist groups, have leaders who make anti-American pronouncements, or have conditions conducive to the rise of extremist movements. Still others illicitly traffic in persons, weapons, conflict diamonds, or other commodities; control critical energy resources; or have fragile political institutions, large and dynamic economies, or any of myriad other attributes.

What states on this long and varied list have in common is the capacity to affect American interests and the efficacy of US foreign, economic, and security policy. Most do not and will not "threaten" the United States in the way that we were once threatened by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, but something, or many things, about them pose challenges and/or opportunities for American diplomacy. The problems of failing states and the tremendous drain on resources in developing countries from AIDS and other pandemics, environmental stress, and corruption affect our ability to partner with allies and friends to meet humanitarian needs in the interest of promoting stability and

democracy. This, in turn, poses challenges and requirements for the Intelligence Community that extend far beyond the collection and analysis of information germane to the suppression of terrorism and limiting the spread of WMD, delivery systems, and advanced conventional weapons. Meeting these challenges requires global coverage, deep expertise, extensive collaboration, and, above all, acceptance of the idea that the mission of the Intelligence Community demands and entails more than collecting and interpreting covertly acquired information on a relatively small number of narrowly defined threats. Focusing on known threats and concerns is necessary but could prove to be very dangerous if we are not equally vigilant in trying to anticipate unknowns and surprises.

Intelligence is, or should be, about more than addressing "threats". The Intelligence Community has been justifiably criticized for serious failings and shortcomings, but we should not lose sight of what we do well and must continue to do well. For example, America's unrivaled military preeminence, demonstrated so dramatically in our elimination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the destruction of Saddam's regime in Iraq, is inextricably linked to the capabilities and accomplishments of our Intelligence Community. Intelligence collection, analytic tradecraft, insights gained through years of experience, and close ties among collectors, analysts, weapons designers, military planners, and troops on the ground are all and equally critical to the military successes we have achieved, the predominance we enjoy, and the fact that conventional military threats to our nation and our citizens are low and almost certain to remain so for many years. Preserving this state of affairs will be neither automatic nor easy, but our efforts and the allocation of resources to do so must not foreclose equally committed efforts to address other threats and challenges.

Terrorism and proliferation are at the top of every agency's list of threats, and the Intelligence Community is committing substantial effort and resources to provide the intelligence support required to contain and reduce those dangers. In part, this requires and involves penetration of highly restricted and suspicious organizations and secure systems of communication, including sophisticated measures to hide financial transactions, obscure relationships, and deceive human and technical collectors. But collection is only one of many essential factors in the equation. To place the intelligence we collect in context, to distinguish between what is true and useful and what is not, and to develop strategies to detect and disrupt activities inimical to American interests requires expert analysts and information on a very wide array of critical variables. Stated another way, it is not possible to identify, anticipate, understand, and disrupt terrorists and proliferators without broad and deep understanding of the countries, cultures, contexts, social networks, economic systems, and political arenas in which they spawn, develop, and operate. Without broad and deep expertise and information that goes far beyond what we can or should collect through clandestine means, we will not be able to judge accurately the information we collect, and will ultimately be reduced to reliance on lucky guesses and chance discoveries. That isn't good enough. We can and must do better.