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Reducing the biological weapons threat

Preparing to cope with biological terrorism and warfare in the USA seems a laudable, if Herculean task.¹ The life-sciences revolution has increased the ability to manipulate biological agents, and the raw materials needed are comparatively inexpensive and available.² But is planning to respond to bioterrorism a form of prevention? I think not.

As well as the increased ease of manipulating pathogens for military purposes, what might be some of the underlying causes for engaging in such research? I suggest that an important factor is the inequality in global power which exists between nations. The persistent perceived slighting of the world's second most populous nation, India, has been attributed as a factor in that country's nuclear weapons programme.³ The development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) may, therefore, be viewed as a comparatively inexpensive way of purchasing international influence and respect. At the same time, the development of such weapons may prove very dangerous, especially, as seems likely, if undertaken by a population who feels resentful or excluded.

There are two ways in which powerful nations may respond to such threats: by attempting to maintain or even increase this inequality, or by defusing it. Neither path is risk free. However, in the period following WWII there seemed to be greater public acceptance that the second path would pay a greater dividend, by leading to a safer

world. This view then became lost in the Cold War and the subsequent return of faith in the free market.⁴

Increasing the global information flow may eventually reduce inequalities,⁵ but at the same time may enhance the risk of terrorism by facilitating the dissemination of techniques used to manufacture WMD. International security cannot be left to the market; deliberate policies designed to give real hope to the world's poor and excluded populations are also needed.

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