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How Likely is a Nuclear Attack?

Nuclear terrorism is a frightening possibility facing the world. Terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda seek nuclear weaponry, and would have no qualms unleashing them on the world. Unlike nation-states, these organizations have much less to lose and face much less rational political pressure to not ignite nuclear war. With the Soviet Union’s collapse and a ton of HEU potentially still out there, the frightening possibility of one of these organizations securing enough to make a small arsenal is despairingly high. One such case in Kazakhstan, with over 1,000 pounds of HEU was found barely secured, only highlights the real threat this possibility poses the modern world. I would place the probability of a nuclear attack on a major American in the next five years at around 35%. That doesn’t factor in whether it will succeed (the improvised weapon could fail to detonate, whether we detect the method of delivery and somehow stop it, or otherwise. The probability of a successful detonation, on the other hand, is lower, more towards 15-20%.

As discussed in the Joint Threat Assessment from the US and Russia, terrorist organizations have been seeking fissile material, attempting to purchase it, trying to harvest it, trying to hire nuclear talent, and testing explosives in preparation. Not only is this threat plausible, it is very real. A terrorist organization getting its hands on a significant quantity of HEU could very seriously threaten world peace. That the two largest nuclear states recognize this possibility should only be more cause for alarm.

Al Qaeda, Northern Caucasus groups, the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, and even the Hezbollah could all be veritable nuclear threats, if given the right opportunities. They may target each other or their local regions, though they may also target the United States. There are many viable targets to choose from, and while a city would be best for maximizing immediate casualties, targeting ports may cause more economical damage. These organizations are aware of this, are ready and looking to cause damage, and are constantly seeking the right opportunity. Combine this with the unfortunate dispersed, not entirely tracked sources of HEU particularly around the Soviet Union, and you have a nonzero possibility for complete and total disaster.

The optimist in me likes to think the strength and intelligence the US has access to may be enough to stave off a less experienced terrorist organization’s attempted nuclear strike. The terrified part of me wonders if we have already missed critical signs; it certainly wouldn’t be the first time. I think there’s a 1 in 3 chance an organization may try something, soon. I’m less convinced such an attack would succeed, but I would put that possibility at around 1 in 5. Not odds I’m comfortable with, but still not a doomsday prediction. For now, I guess the world will have to roll the dice.