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Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press. "Why States Won't Give Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists." *International Security* 31:8 (Summer 2013). DOI: 10.1162/ISEC_a_00127. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00127

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In 2010 U.S. President Barack Obama stated that nuclear terrorism was “the single biggest threat to U.S. security, both short-term, medium-term and long-term”.¹ The events of September 11, 2001 demonstrated the real risk of catastrophic terrorism. It also exacerbated existing fears that groups such as Al-Qaeda would be willing to detonate a nuclear device either on U.S. territory or American valuables abroad. It is one thing to hijack a plane and crash it into a building. It is quite another challenge to obtain a nuclear weapon or the materials needed to assemble a nuclear bomb. Unlike ‘conventional’ arms which proliferate much more easily in the international system, nuclear weapons are much harder to assemble or obtain; a terrorist group would need a state’s assistance to do this. This has raised the issue of terrorism as a technique – that a state might resort to nuclear attack by proxy against the United States and its allies in order to avoid attribution.²

¹ “U.S. President Barack Obama Warns of Nuclear Terrorism”, *BBC News*. At: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8614695.stm>

² See for example, Jonathan Medalia “Nuclear Terrorism: A Brief Review of Threats and Responses,” CRS Report for Congress (Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C. 2004)

One must then ask what the likelihood is that a state would transfer nuclear material to a terrorist or non-state armed group? There are already a number of articles on this subject,³ but most of this work has been deductive in logic. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press present a convincing new set of reasons and evidence to support their main argument that this is an unlikely scenario. They analyse quantitative empirical evidence to show that attribution of a terrorist nuclear attack to a state sponsor would be relatively easy. This, coupled with the likelihood that the state sponsor of a terrorist nuclear attack would suffer terrible punishment, would be sufficient to deter states from giving nuclear weapons or related material to terrorists.

This is a welcome empirical analysis of the question posed by Graham Allison in 2008: If leaders believe that they will be held accountable for their nuclear weapons even if those weapons are stolen, will they be better motivated to prevent theft?⁴ Using data from 'conventional' terrorist attacks, the authors find that it is not overwhelmingly difficult to trace culpability; even taking into account different coding possibilities, researchers from the Global Terrorism Database have been able to identify the attacker forty to forty-five per cent of the time (88-92). Second, they find that the rate of attribution is strongly tied to the number of fatalities caused by the attack. They also point out that there are few countries that are known to support and sponsor terrorist groups and their activities. It would, therefore, not be too difficult to ascertain which country had supported a specific nuclear attack by proxy. As such, a state that feared the terrible punitive damage that would likely result (the authors provide the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan as illustrations of U.S. resolve to use military force as punishment) would be unlikely to provide sensitive nuclear material or even nuclear weapons to a terrorist group.

As Lieber and Press rightly point out, it follows from this that understating U.S. and international attribution capabilities undermines the deterrence of a proxy nuclear attack. This conclusion is supported in some part by history. In the 1960s there were concerns that communists supported by Beijing might try to smuggle and detonate a nuclear device in the U.S., but the conclusion was that China would be unlikely to pursue such action as this would prompt the U.S. to launch a devastating nuclear attack on China.⁵ That thinking seems to hold true today. In February 2006 French President Jacques Chirac said, "Leaders of states who use terrorist methods against us, as well as those who consider using in one way or another weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they would expose themselves to a firm and appropriate response on our part. This response could be a conventional one. It might be of a

³ See for example, Matthew Bunn, "A Mathematical Model of the Risk of Nuclear Terrorism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*. Vol. 607 (September 2006), pp.103-120; Matthew Bunn and Anthony Wier, "Terrorist Nuclear Weapon Construction: How Difficult?," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 607 (September 2006), 133-149; Michael V. Hynes, John E. Peters and Joel Kvitky, "Denying Armageddon: Preventing Terrorist Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 607 (September 2006), 150-161

⁴ Graham Allison, "Nuclear Deterrence in the Age of Nuclear Terrorism," *MIT Technology Review*. 20 October, 2008.

⁵ For an interesting overview of past assessments of the threat of nuclear terrorism, see Micah Zenko, "Intelligence Assessments of Nuclear Terrorism", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.607 (September 2006), 87-102

different kind.”⁶ However, As Andrei Kokoshin points out, however, threatening a nuclear response to a terrorist nuclear attack is vastly different from traditional nuclear planning.⁷ If the U.S. were the victim of a terrorist nuclear attack it might not necessarily respond with a nuclear strike against the sponsoring state, but if the historical record of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is anything to go by, the sponsoring state can be assured that the U.S. response would be swift and devastating.

There are, of course, several criticisms against using available data from ‘conventional’ terrorist attacks to extrapolate the attribution rate of nuclear terrorism, which Lieber and Press address further on in their piece. As they convincingly argue, it is probably true that it would be much easier to identify the culprit of a proxy nuclear attack. For one thing, a terrorist group conducting a ‘conventional’ attack would have acquired its military equipment from a *variety* of sources. With a nuclear attack, the sources are more limited. Still, this assumes that the material would have come from a state, and not an individual, such as the renegade nuclear scientist A.Q. Kahn.

An interesting question that arises from this study, that might be given further examination, is what the incentives are for a terrorist group to want to conduct a nuclear attack. There have been various reports that Al-Qaeda has tried to obtain nuclear weapons, and certainly some extremist groups would have few qualms about seeing a mushroom cloud flower over New York or Los Angeles. But as we have seen, any attack on the scale of September 11 would invite a swift and massive attack (at least a conventional one) against the suspected sponsoring states. Would it be in the interests of terrorist groups to lose their sponsors? There is some value to keeping the scale of an attack limited so as not to provoke an immediate and devastating military response by the victim. Indeed, what would be the strategic logic of suicide terrorism? Also, aside from attack by proxy value, what would be the logic for a state to give a terrorist group nuclear capability? Nuclear weapons are, after all, the great equalizers of international relations. And as Kokoshin has pointed out, nuclear weapons do not just increase a state’s combat capabilities; they are status symbols that enhance national prestige and protect state sovereignty.⁸ Why would a state want to confer any degree of such attributes to a non-state armed group? Why would a state want to give undue power and influence to a non-state actor, when the state could more easily regulate its power by providing –such a group with limited “conventional” military equipment.

Lieber and Press might also have examined (or at least evoked) the obvious question as to how states might be deterred from providing terrorists with other types of military equipment? What determines the level of funding or types of equipment a state will provide a non-state actor? Overall, however, this is a very well written article with persuasive arguments that are supported by credible evidence that could also be used to examine the question just mentioned. As the authors point out, states need to be made much more aware of international detection and attribution capabilities and that support of terrorist organisations will not go by unpunished after a nuclear detonation. And the possible consequences of doing so might be articulated a little less vaguely.

⁶ Peter Schwartz, “French President Threatens Nuclear Retaliation in the Event of a Terrorist Attack”. 21 January 2006. At: www.wsws.org/articles/2006/jan2006/chir-j21.shtml.

⁷ Andrei Kokoshin, “A Nuclear Response to Nuclear Terror: Reflections of Nuclear Preemption.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 607 (September 2006).

⁸ *Ibid.*

In short, this article is a welcome contribution to our understanding of the reality of the likelihood of a nuclear attack by proxy. (Nuclear) terrorism has become the foundation of U.S. non-proliferation policy because of concerns that 1) new nuclear states will be less risk-averse to threatening or orchestrating a nuclear attack; 2) that nuclear material in such states will be less secure, and 3) that new nuclear states may be more likely to transfer such material to non-state actors. But as the authors demonstrate, assuming that the threatening state does not want to suffer a severe punitive attack by the United States and its allies, then it will make all the greatest possible efforts to prevent such groups from ever acquiring weaponizable nuclear material.

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