The Nuclear Threat Is Bigger Than Ever: Are We Prepared?

The nuclear threat is very real and more complex than ever before. Many countries now possess nuclear weapons or the means to produce nuclear materials, complicating both the threat they pose and the risk of a nuclear attack on US soil.

In 2014, President Obama stated that his greatest fear was a nuclear detonation on US soil. When pressed by reporters in The Hague, Netherlands—following Putin's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014—Obama remarked that Russia's actions "don't pose the No. 1 national-security threat to the United States. I continue to be much more concerned, when it comes to our security, with the prospect of a nuclear weapon going off in Manhattan." (Crowley, 2014)

Was Obama defending his inaction in allowing Putin to knock over countries like dominoes in Europe? Of course he was. Yet, there may also have been an element of honesty in his answer. According to the same article, experts at the time estimated the probability of such an attack at 30%—50%—a statistic that would keep anyone up at night.

Then, as now, Putin was attempting to reunite the Russian-speaking peoples of the world and "put Humpty Dumpty back

together again” after the fall of the USSR. More than anything, Putin is an ex-KGB officer and a fanatical patriot. Nuclear war would not achieve his aim; while the threat of nuclear war might have strategic use, it would ultimately destroy his dream of reunification.

This does not mean that thousands of nuclear weapons aimed at the USA are not a threat—they pose a massive risk regardless. However, the danger from Russia may stem more from incompetence and human error. The USA and Russia have narrowly avoided nuclear apocalypse several times since the 1950s. For instance, in 1995, Boris Yeltsin actually powered up his nuclear briefcase, and we almost ended up with “glass-floored, self-lighting” parking lots across the USA.

Mutually assured destruction has kept both nations from nuclear war so far. Yet Russia is no longer the only nuclear threat.

The Rising Threat of Nuclear Terrorism

We once worried about Russian ICBMs, bombers, and nuclear submarines. Then concerns shifted to autonomous nuclear-armed drones, hypersonic nuclear missiles, and supercavitating torpedoes with nuclear warheads. Today, Putin is no longer our sole nuclear-armed adversary. China and the DPRK are actively expanding their nuclear arsenals, and Iran may soon possess nuclear weapons if it does not already.

Perhaps the greater danger lies in the fact that “it is far easier to make a crude, unsafe, unreliable nuclear explosive that might fit in the back of a truck than it is to make a safe, reliable weapon of known yield that can be delivered by missile or combat aircraft.” (Bunn & Roth, 2017)

When the Soviet Union collapsed, reports emerged that nuclear

weapons and materials went missing amid the ensuing chaos. Rumors abounded about missing suitcase nukes and smuggled radioactive materials. Although some reports downplayed the threat—claiming that stolen suitcase nukes would degrade without scheduled maintenance and would likely not detonate—there have been more troubling incidents. In 1993, Bavarian police in Germany seized plutonium-329, smuggled from Russia for sale on the black market. Nuclear physicists determined that part of the seized material was nuclear grade and could have been used to construct a nuclear weapon. (Miller, 1994)

That seizure was the third in Germany that year. If authorities intercepted three shipments, many more may have slipped through, as is common with other types of illicit trafficking.

The raw materials to build crude nuclear weapons are out there. Over 20 seizures of nuclear materials suitable for weaponization have been documented, and at least two terrorist organizations have attempted to acquire a nuclear device. Most recently, in February 2024, the USA charged Takeshi Ebisawa—the head of a Japanese organized crime syndicate—with trafficking in nuclear materials. Ebisawa claimed he could supply up to 5 tons of nuclear material from Myanmar, and he testified in court that he trafficked nuclear materials including uranium and weapons-grade plutonium. (Singh, 2025)

For context, only 5–10 kg of weapons-grade plutonium-239 or 15–25 kg of highly enriched uranium is needed to construct a nuclear weapon.

The IAEA and Nuclear Trafficking

How extensive is the trafficking of nuclear materials? The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) tracks such incidents from 143 of the 193 nations worldwide. Since data

collection began in 1993—the same year material was found in Germany—there have been 344 Group I incidents, defined as those "likely to be connected with trafficking or malicious use." Over the past 30 years, this number underscores the significant threat.

However, most IAEA incidents result from sting operations designed to entrap opportunists rather than catching organized criminal networks. As a result, the data may not reliably reflect the actual scope of serious trafficking. The IAEA itself admits:

"Most trafficking incidents could be characterized as 'amateur' or opportunistic in nature, as demonstrated by ad-hoc planning and a lack of resources and technical proficiency. However, there are a few significant cases that appear more organized, better resourced and that involved perpetrators with a track record in trafficking nuclear/radioactive material or other criminal activities." (IAEA, 2025)

They note that such organized cases are rare and have not occurred in nearly a decade. It is highly unlikely that the IAEA alone will prevent a country—or a terrorist organization—from perpetrating a nuclear attack on US soil unless that nation willingly turns over its nuclear materials or exposes the terrorist networks it is harboring or funding.

What If a Terrorist Nuke Detonates in Manhattan?

A nuclear detonation in Manhattan is easier to comprehend than the U.S. government's response to it.

Experts often claim the probability of such an attack is low—but history is filled with *"low-probability events"* that caught humanity off guard with devastating consequences.

According to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists and NUKEMAP by Alex Wellerstein, even a small 10-kiloton nuclear weapon—smaller than the bomb dropped on Nagasaki—would cause unimaginable destruction:

- **Fireball radius:** 440 meters (hotter than the sun, instantly vaporizing everything within it)
- **Heavy blast damage:** 469-meter radius (concrete buildings severely damaged or destroyed)
- **Thermal radiation:** 1.41-kilometer radius (anyone in direct line of sight suffers third-degree burns)
- **Light blast damage:** 2.53-kilometer radius (windows shattered, widespread structural damage)

A single small nuke would make Manhattan uninhabitable for years. And that's a best-case scenario.

How to Prepare for a Nuclear Attack

I am not wealthy in terms of money, but here are a few things that I did that I am willing to share.

1. Get off the "X"

I studied nuclear target maps, read Rawles' *Retreats* (it was spiral-bound back then) and Skousen's *Strategic Relocation*, and then moved to an area not typically downwind from major targets. I chose a location with reliable water sources, ample farmland, and a low population density—about 20 years ago.

The key is not to build your home or rent an apartment on the "X" (the high-risk target zone as depicted in cartoons like Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner). If you must live on the "X," have a clear bug-out plan and a safe destination in mind; otherwise, you risk becoming a refugee.

2. Protect Yourself Against Fallout

You can take measures to shield yourself from fallout. See my article on Improvised Fallout Shelter Tips for tips on what can be done to protect yourself from fallout. Because fallout may cause more casualties than the blast itself, protecting yourself and your family is critical.

3. Be Prepared to Endure the Aftermath

A nuclear attack isn't the only threat—the aftermath could be equally, if not more, devastating. Beyond the immediate blast, you may face prolonged challenges such as starvation, disease, or violence. To prepare:

- Learn self-defense and acquire the means to protect yourself.
- Stockpile medical supplies.
- Accumulate clothing, blankets, and fuel for heating and cooking, especially if you live in colder climates.
- Secure water storage and methods to procure and purify water when supplies run low.
- Build up a food storage reserve.
- Consider planting fruit and nut trees, starting a garden, or raising a few chickens. Even a few pots on a balcony can be a start—relying solely on tilling your lawn and mail-order seeds is not sufficient.
- Start saving money to support your long-term survival

needs.

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