

Homeland Security

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Short Commentary

Homeland security is about safeguarding the US from domestic catastrophic destruction. This is my definition, not the official one. The difference is that the official definition focuses on causes, terrorism and natural disasters, while mine focuses on effects, domestic catastrophic destruction. Terrorism is a crime distinguished by motive, to try and coerce US government. The problem with focusing on a specific motive is that it ignores other possible motives and overlooks means and opportunity, the other two prerequisites for crime. Moreover, the word "safeguard" in my definition recognizes that there is no absolute security, just as you can't stop a hurricane you can't stop a determined attacker, and that homeland security entails actions across the four phases of disaster: prevent, protect, respond, and recover. Otherwise, my definition agrees that domestic catastrophic destruction comes in two forms: natural and manmade. For most of history, manmade catastrophic destruction took the form of warfare and required the combined resources of a nation state. All that changed on March 20th, 1995. On that date, members of a quasi-religious cult, Aum Shinrikyo, attempted to bring down Japanese government and establish a new world order with their leader, Shibuya Asahara, as emperor by deploying Sarin gas during morning rush hour on the Tokyo subway system. Twelve victims died in the attack, but experts say thousands more could have been killed. It was the first deployment of a weapon of mass destruction by a non-state actor. The implications were profound. National defences designed to keep rogue states in check were useless against criminal's intent on acquiring and deploying WMD. The Tokyo Subway Attacks prompted Congress to re-examine US government and determine if it was up to the task of thwarting WMD attacks by non-state actors. Both the Gilmore and Hart-Rudman commissions concluded the answer was "no". Acting on their recommendations, Representative William Thornberry (R-TX) in April 2001 introduced House Resolution 1158 to create a National Homeland Security Agency. That legislation was sitting in Congress five months later when the United States was attacked on 9/11. On September 11th, 2001, nineteen hijackers inflicted as much damage as the Imperial Japanese Navy on December 7th, 1941. The investigating 9/11 Commission noted the attacks for their "surpassing disproportion". The hijackers achieved WMD effects without using WMD. They did this by subverting the nation's transportation infrastructure, turning passenger jets into guided missiles. Again, the implications were profound. Non-state actor's intent on inflicting domestic catastrophic destruction did not need to fabricate or import WMD as the nation was surrounded by the means for its own destruction in the form of critical infrastructure. This vulnerability had not gone unnoticed. Reacting to the 1995 Tokyo Subway Attacks, which themselves were an attack on Japan's

transportation infrastructure, President Clinton formed a commission to examine the vulnerability of US infrastructure. In 1997, the commission on critical infrastructure protection reported that US infrastructure was not under immediate threat, but that there was a growing concern about the potential for cyberattack. As the commission noted, the same cyber-physical systems that enabled the explosive growth of the Internet were being incorporated into Industrial Control Systems that underpinned many key components of the nation's critical infrastructure. President Clinton responded by issuing Presidential Decision Directive #63 in May 1998 ordering the protection of critical infrastructure, especially from cyberattack. Accordingly, critical infrastructure protection and cybersecurity were made core missions of the new Department of Homeland Security when the Homeland Security Act was signed into law in November 2002. They remain core missions to this day, but many don't see the connection. The connection is this: cybersecurity is essential to critical infrastructure protection, which is essential to homeland security, which is about safeguarding the US from domestic catastrophic destruction. While cybercrime has garnered much of the recent headlines regarding the theft of personal data on millions of people, what keeps security experts awake at night are the potential consequences of cyberattack on critical infrastructure. At least three scenarios give them nightmares:

- shutting down the North American Electric Grid,
- causing simultaneous meltdowns at two or more nuclear power plants, or
- undermining the Federal Reserve.

The potential consequences from any of these scenarios could make them the worst disaster in US history. Despite these concerns, there is hope for a brighter future. When you switch focus from trying to find those who might harbour terrorist motives, to restricting criminal means and opportunity for committing domestic catastrophic destruction, then you can start to see real progress towards making the US and the world a safer place. Since 9/11, the US government has placed tighter controls on chemical, biological, and nuclear agents needed to acquire or fabricate a weapon of mass destruction in this country. Likewise, the Department of Homeland Security National Protection and Programs Directorate is working with infrastructure owners and operators to reduce their vulnerability to cyberattack. But if you remember nothing more, I hope you will remember this: cybersecurity is essential to critical infrastructure protection, which is essential to homeland security, which is about safeguarding the US from domestic catastrophic destruction.