

Beyond Hiroshima: Blackout warfare

Failed states like North Korea and Iran, or terrorists, can destroy the most advanced societies on Earth with an EMP attack. Op-ed.

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“Someday science shall have the existence of Mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.” - Henry Adams (1862)

76 years ago, on August 6, 1945, a single A-bomb destroyed Hiroshima killing 135,000. A single H-bomb detonated over New York City could kill 10 million.

Today, a single nuclear electromagnetic pulse (EMP) warhead detonated 300 kilometers high over North America could kill 300 million. There would be no blast, fire, and radiation, as at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Only an invisible electromagnetic wave, harmless to people, but lethal to electric grids, communications, transportation, food and water and other critical infrastructures that sustain the lives of 330 million Americans.

The same existential result can be achieved by a dozen, or fewer, non-nuclear EMP (NNEMP) warheads delivered by drones or cruise missiles, programmed to attack electric power control centers and transformer substations.

So, too, cyber-attack or special forces sabotage—an “army” of a few dozen terrorists using rifles or explosives to destroy perhaps as few as nine key transformers—could blackout electric grids and other life-sustaining critical infrastructures for a year, causing 90% of the population to perish from starvation eventually. U.S. military capabilities would be paralyzed or crippled severely.

Many policymakers and national security experts schooled in the conventional and nuclear strategies of the Cold War still cannot grasp that modern civilization could be extinguished, national populations virtually annihilated, from a war on infrastructure electronics. For an education, read the unclassified EMP Commission reports at www.firstempcommission.org or the article by EMP Commission Chairman, William Graham, and former Director of Central Intelligence, R. James Woolsey, “Prepare For The Worst” (RealClearDefense 21 October 2019).

Immediately, few or no fatalities may result from EMP, NNEMP, cyber, or sabotage attacks on electric grids, an attractive feature of this revolutionary new mode of warfare. Adversaries can, in effect, hold hostage the lives of the North American population, whose salvation will depend upon the U.S. government focusing all remaining resources on their rescue, instead of fighting World War III.

Blackout Warfare, the name of my forthcoming book, and term used here to describe a military strategy focused on attacking national electric grids and critical infrastructure electronics, is called many things by many nations.

The Congressional EMP Commission calls it Combined-Arms Cyber Warfare. Russian military doctrine writes of No Contact Warfare, Electronic Warfare, and Network Centric Warfare. China calls it Total Information Warfare. Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran all call it Cyber Warfare. But their version of Cyber Warfare, and all these other labels for the same concept, include special forces sabotage, NNEMP, and nuclear EMP attack.

The EMP Commission warns that adversaries regard this new way of warfare as the greatest Revolution in Military Affairs in history:

“Combined-arms cyber warfare, as described in the military doctrines of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, may use combinations of cyber-, sabotage, and ultimately nuclear EMP attack to impair the United States quickly and decisively by blacking-out large portions of its electric grid and other critical infrastructures. Foreign adversaries may aptly consider nuclear EMP attack a weapon that can gravely damage the U.S. by striking at its technological Achilles Heel, without having to confront the U.S. military. The synergism of such combined arms is described in the military doctrines of all these potential adversaries as the greatest revolution in military affairs in history—one which projects rendering many, if not all, traditional instruments of military power obsolete.” (Assessing the Threat from EMP Attack, July 2017)

Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran are right. The U.S. electric grid is a technological Achilles heel, vulnerable to attack by many different means. Blackout Warfare could quickly and relatively easily paralyze all U.S. critical infrastructures, including:

- Government
- Military
- Electric Power
- Telecommunications
- Transportation
- Petroleum and Natural Gas
- Banking and Finance
- Food and Water
- Emergency Services
- Space

Imagine the consequences of the collapse of all these critical infrastructures, as would happen by blacking-out the electric grid—electric power being the keystone critical infrastructure that sustains all the others—some failing immediately, others within hours, virtually all within 72 hours (after exhaustion of emergency power).

It would be the end of civilization, and a golden opportunity for aggressors.

Never before in history have little failed states like North Korea and Iran, or terrorists, been able to destroy the most advanced societies on Earth. For the first time in history, the dependency of nations upon the very electronic technologies that make possible modern civilization, also makes them vulnerable to malevolent modern barbarians and pygmy powers.

Most dangerous is the failure of strategic imagination in West and East to understand these new Weapons of Mass Destruction are more dangerous than H-bombs because they are more tempting to use.

Those who think EMP and Cyber Warfare are “grey-zone aggression” and “short of a real shooting war” are playing with existential fire.

The U.S. government should quickly implement the recommendations of the EMP Commission to protect electric grids and other critical infrastructures against nuclear EMP, as protection against this worst-case threat can mitigate other threats, including from NNEMP, Cyber Warfare, and special forces sabotage.

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