



Countering Urban Terrorism in India

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New Phenomenon

As an ancient civilisation but a young nation-state, India is still engaged in the process of nation building. This tumultuous process has been marked by communal riots, unending insurgencies in most of the northeastern states, Pakistan-supported militancy in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and left-wing extremism in large parts of Central India. However, the phenomenon of urban terrorism is of more recent vintage and is more diabolical in nature. By striking terror into the hearts of the workforce living and working in the most productive metros and larger cities of India and frequently paralysing economic activity, urban terrorism is tending to undermine India's booming economy and vitiating the investment climate.

Urban terrorism reached India's shores with the serial bomb blasts in Mumbai in 1993. Since then, the list of the targeted cities includes Delhi (2005), Jammu, Ayodhya (2005), Varanasi (2006), Bangalore (2005) and Mumbai (2006). More recent cases include the serial blasts and suicide bombings in Malegaon (September 2006), the Samjhauta Express (February 2007), Mecca Masjid, Hyderabad (May 2007), Gokul Chat and Lumbini Park, Hyderabad (August 2007) and the serial bombings in UP courts

(November 2007). Since 2003, 16 major attacks have taken place in urban centres. Of these, four were in Mumbai, three in Delhi and Guwahati, two in Hyderabad, and one each in Bangalore, Jaipur, Varanasi and Ahmedabad. In 2008 alone, Jaipur was targeted in May, Ahmedabad in July, New Delhi in September, Kanpur in October and Mumbai in November – the most perfidious attack of them all. All of these attacks led to large-scale casualties, material damage and disruption of life and economic activity.

Terrorists prefer urban areas because of their 'target-rich environment', i.e. the presence of a 'defined enemy' in abundance: laymen, officials, foreign nationals, corporate heavy weights, government buildings with symbolic/strategic value, bus stands, railway stations, airports, markets, foreign embassies, communication centres, etc. This also gives an added advantage to terrorists to prevent any kind of indiscriminate counter-terrorist operation by the state that could maximise collateral damage. Unlike in rural areas, inhabitants in cities and towns are more heterogeneous and that gives the terrorists greater space for anonymity. Since terrorism is propaganda by the deed, the attention seeking goal of the

contd. to pg 2.



Countering Urban...

terrorist is well served in the urban environment where the immediate audience is the greatest and where representatives of the print and electronic media are readily available and quite eager to report the aftermath of an attack.

Terrorist attacks in urban India are taking place at regular intervals of every two-three months, with steadily increasing frequency in the recent years. The attacks also have become more lethal. Terrorists have now turned to 'soft' targets, but are using 'hard' tactics like suicide attacks claiming hundreds of lives. Contemporary terrorist groups are highly networked, more global in reach, have diverse motivations and are technologically sophisticated. The present threat of urban terrorism in India is diabolical, constant, deadly, unpredictable and transnational. Preventing and countering this menace needs a coordinated response at the national level.

Prevention Strategies

Identifying the Enemy

In counter-terrorism, prevention is far more desirable than cure. The first step must be to identify the enemy. A comprehensive database of the terror groups active in India must be drawn up, detailing their ideology, organisational set-up, leadership, goals, *modus operandi*, training systems, support network, the

weapon systems at their disposal and their sources of funding. The Indian linkages of the foreign terrorist organisations need to be clearly identified.

Terrorism in Indian cities is driven mainly by religious fundamentalists operating from across India's borders, often with the support of sections of the government machinery. The most active foreign terrorist organisations are the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayebba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and the Bangladesh-based Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI). All four organisations are loosely affiliated with Osama bin Laden's International Islamic Front whose ultimate aim is to establish an Islamic Caliphate with India as an integral part of it. Of late, these terrorist organisations have been known to receive local support from the banned Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), which wishes to liberate India from the materialistic cultural influence of the West and to create an Islamic society.

The aim of the terrorist organisations planning strikes in Indian cities is to create an environment of panic leading to a majority community backlash against the minority so that India's secular credentials are undermined. They also seek to force the government machinery to react with repression and violence. The tools of terror are car and scooter bombs, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed in trains and buses and,

International Experience of Urban Terrorism

While urban terrorism is relatively new to India, it has a long history in the international arena. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) had successfully fought British forces in Northern Ireland for several decades before a political settlement was finally negotiated with the Sinn Fein. Members of the IRA had well-established links with the FARC narco-terrorists in Colombia. The Baader-Meinhof gang, a communist urban guerrilla group, was responsible for several acts of terrorism in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s. Palestinian militants have managed to launch numerous terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians despite Israel's vigorous preemptive measures and a proactive response strategy. In May 1980, Arab gunmen had seized the Iranian Embassy in London and held about 20 people hostage. Members of Aum Shinrikyo, a cult group, carried out five coordinated Sarin gas attacks on several lines of the Tokyo Metro in March 1995. In September 2004, Chechen rebels seized a school building in Beslan, Russia, and held more than 1,000 students and teachers hostage; over 350 hostages died in the botched up rescue attempt.

occasionally, suicide bombings. Assassination attempts and kidnappings are bound to follow. Heavily armed gunmen launched terror attacks in Mumbai last month for the first time. The tactics, techniques and procedures adopted by them clearly indicate that they had been given commando training either by the Special Services Group (SSG), the elite special forces of the Pakistan Army, or by retired Pakistani mercenary commandos who have joined the LeT.

As the Mumbai experience has shown, well-armed terrorists are not easy to fight in urban terrain as tall buildings and narrow lanes and alleys provide inherent protection to them and make the security forces easy targets. The presence of hostages further complicates military or police operations. Similarly, IED attacks and suicide bombings are extremely difficult to detect or prevent in time. The key to success in fighting urban terrorism lies in obtaining accurate intelligence about impending attacks and the neutralisation of the terrorists before they can launch their planned attacks. While electronic surveillance, including the interception of communications, is no doubt useful, it is of critical importance to penetrate the networks and sleeper cells of the terrorist organisations so as to gain what has come to be called actionable intelligence.

Securing India's Borders

Border security is critical for preventing terrorist attacks from across India's porous borders. India's land borders have for long been used for infiltration by inimical forces. Vigilance along the borders needs to be substantially enhanced, including through the use of hi-tech surveillance devices. Border management also needs to be more efficiently coordinated between various central agencies that operate along the country's borders. In this respect, the report of the Border Management Committee, established by the Group of Ministers that studied the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee, must be implemented in full at an early date.

India's 7,516-km-long coastline along nine states and four union territories (UTs) and 1,197 islands are especially vulnerable. The coast guard (an armed force of the union under the Ministry of Defence and the marine police (state-level police forces), the primary agencies responsible for guarding the coastline, do not have adequate personnel or infrastructure to discharge their responsibilities. The "Coastal Security Scheme" launched in March 2006 by the Union Home Ministry, in which 73 coastal police stations, 97 check posts, 58 outposts and 30 barracks are planned, requires to be revisited in terms of quantity and quality of the proposed infrastructure. The decision to install coastal radars all along the coast is appreciable. In addition, police personnel of coastal states and UTs should be given specialised training in mounting maritime vigilance. Needless to say that better coordination among the navy, coast guard, customs and state police is required. There is also an urgent need to register and regulate around 300,000 fishing boats operating in the seas off the Indian coasts. High security number plates for all fishing vessels should be made compulsory.

Strengthening Intelligence

Accurate, timely and specific intelligence is an important tool for preventing terror attacks. Terrorist attacks occur either due to absence of precise/actionable intelligence or of follow-up action when such intelligence was available. Intelligence gathering in India, especially preventive aspects of intelligence, needs substantial improvement. In order to improve intelligence

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acquisition, it is necessary to penetrate the leadership of the terrorist organisations for the collection of human intelligence (HUMINT) and monitor their communications set-up for the collection of technical intelligence (TECHINT). Innovative measures need to be evolved for the collection of intelligence on terrorist groups. Conventional methods are no longer relevant and are increasingly yielding diminishing returns. Since the threat of urban terrorism is transnational in nature, there is an urgent need for regional and international networking of friendly intelligence agencies. Most importantly, the central and state intelligence agencies should share information methodically and it must trickle down in real-time to the user who is required to take action.

‘Target Hardening’

Terrorists usually choose high-profile soft targets like markets, railway stations, airports, bus stands, hotels, places of worship, government infrastructure to attract maximum attention. Such targets should be put under maximum surveillance and protection. The staff manning these places should be trained in rendering first aid, evacuation techniques, and rescue and relief operations. Surveillance cameras, metal and explosive vapour detectors and X-ray scanning machines should be installed at key access points. Technology to detect and alert for suspicious activity such as loitering by an individual or vehicle should be made use of. Security personnel should be sensitised to spotting and segregating suspicious objects that are left behind.

Community Policing

Without the eyes, ears and intuition of the general public, it is difficult to identify a terrorist who is anonymous and blends seamlessly into the environment in which he is living and operating. An effective battle against terrorism can be waged only by involving members of the public. This includes creating societal awareness to keep a steady eye on tentative or errant behaviour in the neighbourhood

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and sharing of information of suspicious movements with point persons in the police and intelligence agencies. For instance, on every New York City subway train, the message to passengers since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has been clear: “If you see something, say something.” For this purpose, urban Indians must organise themselves into neighbourhood watch committees through community consensus mechanisms based on genuine concern to prevent future terrorist attacks. All communities should be coopted in counter-terror measures instead of perceiving some as the “other”. The community of Indian fishermen should keep a constant tab on coastal waters. Awareness creation among people should also include ‘golden rules’ to be followed by the people in case of a terrorist attack. Such familiarisation will not only minimise the lethality of terrorist attacks, but also reduce the consequent panic.

Cooperation with Other Countries

Since terrorism has become a global menace, cooperation with other friendly countries that are also affected is crucial in countering it. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1373 mandates all member countries to initiate steps in this regard. International cooperation should be based on a global strategy against terrorism that “would be free from double standards and self-serving interests, and would unite the world rather than divide it.” The strategy should be to identify breeding grounds of terrorism all over the world and gradually neutralise them through socio-economic measures and military action where necessary.



The government must enter into extensive cooperative arrangements with friendly countries to maximise the advantages of intelligence sharing, seek training assistance and acquire expertise available with countries like Israel and the United States that have had a head start in this field. Joint military exercises aimed at enhancing counter-terrorism skills should be made a routine. Each country can benefit immensely from the other's experience, technology, intelligence and threat evaluation. For instance, Latin American countries like Columbia and Peru have immense experience in countering urban terrorism; the US possesses the requisite technology; Israel has compiled an enormous data base on pan-Islamist terrorist organisations. India should tap these resources on priority basis. Also, in the absence of bilateral extradition treaties, a clear legal basis for international cooperation in investigating terrorist attacks is missing. The UN can contribute meaningfully to bridge this gap.

Deterrence and Operational Strategies

Covert Operations

In order to achieve a lasting impact and ensure that the actual perpetrators of terrorism are targeted, while simultaneously avoiding collateral damage, it is necessary to employ covert capabilities to neutralise the leadership of terrorist organisations. Clandestine operations can be methodically planned and stealthily executed at an opportune moment. These are not time critical responses and also have an element of 'plausible deniability' built

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into them. Other advantages include relatively low political, economic and military costs and low risk of casualties to own operatives as local personnel – who harbour grudges against the targeted organisations – can often be used.

Young operatives must be selected and trained – first in the rudiments of intelligence gathering and after being given some in-country experience, in the complexities of high-risk special operations in a hostile foreign environment. They will also need to be imparted specialised instructions in selecting, training and motivating local agents to carry out pre-planned and opportunity strikes against nominated targets. It will take at least three to five years to put in place basic capabilities for covert operations as both the terrorist organisations and their handlers will have to be penetrated. Targets should include the leaders of fundamentalist terrorist organisations who are known to sponsor terrorist strikes in India, their handlers and fugitives from Indian justice like Dawood Ibrahim.

Specialised Counter-Terrorism Forces

The success of counter-terrorism operations depends to a considerable extent on a speedy response, with operations being executed by the right force that is trained, armed and equipped suitably for the job at hand. As the National Security Guard (NSG) is India's primary strike force for counter-terrorist operations, it must be given the wherewithal to respond swiftly to terrorist attacks to minimise casualties and deny the perpetrators the ability to consolidate. The central government's recent decision to locate NSG echelons in the cities that have been targeted most frequently will enable the force to respond in a timelier manner. The NSG must also be equipped with state-of-the-art technology and equipment to enable the commandos to enhance their operational performance and minimise their own casualties. Where necessary, the Indian Army's elite special forces should be employed to counter terrorist attacks in urban areas. Every state should have an NSG-type commando force to counter

...Terrorism in India

lethal terror strikes. They can be called State Security Guards (SSG). Local availability of such forces will ensure that precious time is not lost in transit.

Equip Police Adequately

Lack of proper equipment for police personnel came to the fore during recent Mumbai terror attack. For instance, even NSG commandos did not possess high-power night vision devices to locate the terrorists, or the technology to determine where the gunfire was coming from.

Police constables are poorly armed and the firemen lack protection. Rehearsals should be periodically undertaken for search-and-rescue operations after large-scale terrorist strikes. Different contingencies should be simulated and practised. Future training should also cater for terrorist attacks in the form of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Anti-terror Laws

The underlying issue is not adequacy or inadequacy of laws, but their correct implementation. India has a very low conviction rate of less than 10 per cent in terrorism-related cases. This was so even under so-called draconian laws like POTA and TADA as against 80 per cent plus in Western countries. The success of counter-terrorism legislation depends on how the provisions relating to all three levels – ‘prevention’,

‘deterrence’ and ‘correction’ – are incorporated and implemented in a balanced manner.

Conclusion

Though it is a relatively new phenomenon in India, urban terrorism is gradually taking root as a diabolical threat to the state and to society, particularly because it is finding sponsors in neighbouring countries whose governments are either unwilling or unable to control terrorist organisations operating from their soil. Since it is a new threat whose various manifestations are yet to be fully comprehended, India’s response has been sluggish and less than appropriate. The central and state governments must rely on both preventive strategies – premised on accurate and timely intelligence acquisition – and counter-terrorist operations to fight the scourge of urban terrorism. Specially-equipped and trained central and state forces must be employed for counter-terrorism operations. These forces must be given the wherewithal necessary to deploy and launch effective operations quickly so as to minimise casualties and damage. Also, urban terrorism is not a phenomenon that India can fight alone. It is only through a concerted international approach that the adverse impact of growing urban terrorism can be minimised.



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