

Terror Without Tags: Need For A Comprehensive National Security Policy

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Summary

Nation States prioritize the pursuit of security in such a way that threats to national security from external sources are cordoned from threats that arise from within. However, terror without 'tag values' - i.e. without an actor to perform, without an explicit intention of any party involved, due to the scourges of inefficient regulatory mechanisms and which has very little incubation time to register as serious threats – are important security threats which require concerted action among the people and the state for successful resolution. Empowered civil-society, decentralized capacity building and proactive citizenry can facilitate not only recognizing of the threats early, but also achieving quicker restitution of order.

Modern Nation States show striking proclivity in establishing a hierarchy of objectives. Among others, the pursuit of security is placed as a primary objective without which other goals remain vulnerable. In its broadest sense security can be defined as the state of being free from danger or injury, however it remains as elusive a concept for precise definition. Therefore Nation States prioritize the pursuit of security in such a way that threats to national security from external sources are cordoned from threats that arise from within. Though newer definitions of security, particularly in the context of developing countries, have questioned such compartmentalization, states acquire a significant cognitive behavior before they could attempt indigenous definitions of security. That is states learn by watching what others do. This leads to problems such as external threat attribution, preference to think that their state is on the side of the angels and their opponents are aligned with the devil¹, preparations to confront tangible threats and disregard intangibles, and a propensity to ignore 'terror without tag values'. This essay attempts to explain this lackadaisical state behavior to ignore terrors without tags in the context of India's response to two significant events: the recent Cobalt 60 radiation exposure and the Swine Flu pandemic. What these two events have in common is the radiation terror and biological terror that came without the conventional tags of 'terrorism' but created enough incentives for panic among masses. The essay concludes by stating that, given the propensity of chemical, biological and radiological threats to arise without tag values, a strong decentralized societal activism could prevent state's lackadaisical attitude towards these threats.

Cobalt 60 is a radioactive isotope of Cobalt which has a potential to cause severe radioactive contamination. On 9 April 2010, this radioactive material was found in a small scrap dealer's shop at the Mayapuri Industrial area of Delhi. The scrap dealer and his agents who were exposed to the radiation suffered injuries and were quarantined in a hospital. After the news came to light police cordoned off the area upto

one km and did not allow people to enter the locality. There were around 200 scrap shops in the market.² Thereafter important questions like sources of such radioactive emissions, the place of origin of such scrap, whether India is on the radar of terrorists who might use Cobalt 60 to create severe contamination, need for a multi-layered system of safeguards against such incidents and the need to have monitoring rights from imports of metal scrap to track its journey within the country³ were discussed. However, except that the geographical scope of this incident is small, the terror caused by this incident, particularly among the people of Mayapuri Industrial area, is no different from what a terrorist would have imposed if he had capitalized on this Cobalt 60 contamination. After giving some assurances on the floor of the Indian Parliament, the government took no measures to strengthen civil-society's response to such accidents. Sadly, after few days this Cobalt 60 event became a non-issue among other citizens of Delhi.

The incident proves the point that such terror without 'tag values' - i.e. without an actor to perform, without an explicit intention of any party involved, due to the scourges of inefficient regulatory mechanisms and which has very little incubation time to register as serious threats – are important security threats which requires concerted action among the people and the state for successful resolution. Importantly, engineering a fast and efficient mechanism of reassurances among the masses would enable the state to treat the cause of such terror without surging on symptoms. This requires not just recognizing such silent threats but also usurping them within the definition of 'security'.

Consider the Swine flu pandemic in India. Other technical details apart, between the first reported case of flu in India in the month of May 2009 and the recent report published in March 2010 there were reported deaths of 1,443 people.⁴ The level of terror infested by this pandemic was no less than any purposeful terror incident of other sort; however, the state machinery was unable (at the initial stages) to balance requirements of inquiry and restitution of order. For example, even after

few reported deaths, the state did not use its official communication channels to disseminate vital information even when logic foretells that more than usual appeals for information would hit the help desk. Though the World Health Organisation (WHO) had designated the outbreak of flu as a public health emergency of international concern, India's started its work late. Luckily, WHO admitted that the seriousness of the pandemic had been overestimated⁵, which covered India's underestimation of such threats. Juggling with numbers, the frequency of deaths in India due to Swine Flu was one in every twenty three people; however, for China it was one in every one hundred and fifty six people. A huge difference indeed!

The problem is that the outbreak of such pandemics is not seen within the definitions of 'security'. If advanced nations can manage such scenarios as health issues, mirror imaging such behaviour by developing countries, would preclude any proactive measures to confront threats. In a hypothetical scenario, let us assume that India's adversaries had purposefully infested the Swine Flu or any other biological agent with terror objectives; it is unclear how, with the given socio-political response mechanism, the state would coordinate national restitution, propagate internal reassurances and at the same time conceive of diplomacy or war outside. Unless the state-society coordination is well established the potential to confront conventional threats would be reduced. In other words, responses to 'threats without tags' should be taken as acid-test for future preparations.

In the changed conditions of modern times, chemical, biological and radiological agents not only have high propensity to create panic among the masses, but also attract attention without tag values. A state may not be threatened with a conventional imagery of nerve gas attacks or mustard gas attacks by dissenting groups but chemical weapons terror can originate from subtle sources like hazardous chemicals from industries polluting the river and causing few mysterious deaths. Similarly biological and radiological terror might occur as small and unavoidable accidents but could create enough panic reducing the state's

ability to rapidly respond to situations. Unless good governance is achieved with disciplined regulatory measures, a highly interconnected world would inevitably see CBRN incidents that were traditionally construed to happen from outside. Any compartmentalization of security therefore would complicate the state's ability to respond effectively. How can such complications be avoided?

Firstly, it is very important to look beyond traditional compartmentalization of security. Chemical, biological and radiological agents even without conventional tags attached to them can hamper security. A state's response to CBRN security therefore must not be contingent upon the means of its origin. Instead the response ought to be as comprehensive as it could possibly be to socialize the masses about the seriousness of the state to such issues. Secondly, effective state-society coordination is important for the pursuit of security against untagged CBRN terrors. Empowered civil-society, decentralized capacity building and proactive citizenry can facilitate not only recognizing of the threats early, but also achieving quicker restitution of order. For this the state has to intensely network with its citizens through its official communication channels, establish easier but stronger modes of decentralized governance and involve citizens in social restitution. For untagged CBRN threats, the state has to communicate its resolve of well-preparedness. Finally, each state has to indigenously define its concept of security. This is more important for developing countries which still have to establish strong procedural, regulatory and institutional capacity building. In this context, unchecked chemical leak is a security threat rather than a technical snag. To conclude, the imperatives of the socio-technological revolution demands proactive comprehensiveness in confronting CBRN threats both from within and without; when the stakes are high it is important not to ignore 'threats' which masquerade as 'accidents'.

Endnotes:

1. Taken from John Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton), p.23
2. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/62894/>

[cobalt-60-source-radiation-west.html](#). Accessed on 25th April, 2010.

3. <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?265165>. Accessed on 25th April, 2010.
4. <http://mohfw-h1n1.nic.in/documents/PDF/EpidemiologicalTrendsInIndia.pdf>. Accessed on 25th April, 2010.
5. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-questions-WHOs-false-alarm-on-swine-flu/articleshow/5477875.cms>. Accessed on 25th April, 2010.