



THREATS OF NUCLEAR TERRORISM: A CASE STUDY OF INDIA

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In the post-9/11 world, India's nuclear establishment is threatened by nuclear terrorism. Some analysts suggest that India may be home to up to 36 active terrorist organizations. It is thus crucial that New Delhi establishes robust and reliable security measures of its nuclear facilities and its nuclear arsenal before further expansion.

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, concern over the possibility of nuclear terrorism has significantly increased. While many States consider nuclear weapons as a guarantee to their national security, the possible possession of these weapons by terrorist groups, or attacks on nuclear facilities by such groups, threatens global security. Terrorism, in the last two decades, has increased and become a serious challenge to governments and security agencies around the world. The use of advanced weapons, sophisticated technologies and guerilla war tactics by terrorist groups are very difficult for any State to counter. Similarly, the media has increasingly become a major weapon employed by such groups for purposes of propaganda and recruitment.

India faces the serious challenges of terrorism and separatists' movements. Shaken by sectarian strife and terrorism for many decades, India resides in one of the most violence-prone regions in the world. Jihadist groups have caused much of this violence.¹ Despite its history of sustained democratization, India has constantly been troubled by terrorist violence. While much attention has been focused on the current secessionist movement of Muslim groups in Kashmir, terrorist threats have always been diverse, encompassing numerous geographical areas, ethnic groups, ideologies, and cross-border spillovers.² The number of terrorist attacks in India has risen sharply in the past decade and the state of Punjab has witnessed much of the violence. India is finally pursuing the idea of proscribing nearly 100 terrorist entities, both regional and international.³ But this task is difficult and could inflame State versus non-State tensions. Many parts of India are facing different terrorists and separatists' movements such as the Northeastern region (Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura), the Northern hills of West

Bengal, the states of Tamil Nadu, Indian Occupied Kashmir, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, and the territories of Chandigarh and New Delhi. One analyst suggests that there are 36 active terrorist organizations in India, which are carrying out operations across the country.⁴

Meanwhile, India is one of several nuclear weapon states in the world. The Indo-US nuclear deal not only promises to leave India's nuclear weapons capabilities intact but allows for a rapid and large expansion.⁵ Access to the international uranium market to fuel its power reactors could further free up domestic uranium for military uses. This may allow a significant expansion in India's nuclear weapons capabilities.⁶ This potential increase, combined with its current nuclear infrastructure and arsenal, makes India particularly vulnerable to threats from numerous terrorist groups. However, few studies have attempted to gauge the extent of the problem.⁷

India's Nuclear Establishment

India's nuclear establishment, most of it civilian, is large.⁸ Although, India claims that it has managed a high level of security and inherent safety features, there are several security risks for Indian nuclear power plants from terrorists or non-State actors. The reliability of personnel is of serious concern in India as civilians, and not military personnel, maintain operational control of the weapons.⁹ While little information is available on the policy of personnel reliability in India, the system of intelligence vetting is not believed to be complemented by regular psychological testing, behavior analysis, or a reporting system, such as the Continuous Behavior Observation Program in the US.¹⁰ As a result, the level of vulnerability to nuclear and radiological terrorism will grow commensurately if nuclear weapons



inventories expand. The larger a nuclear force the greater its exposure and therefore its vulnerability to terrorist assault; more weapons offer more targets for terrorists.

Safeguarding nuclear arsenals is a major task for all the nuclear weapon States in general, and which possess the largest number of weapons and a huge amount of nuclear radioactive material, in particular.¹¹ The Indian nuclear infrastructure is located across the country and, comprises a range of activities. They constitute fuel fabrication facilities, research reactors, power plants, plutonium reprocessing plants, spent fuel pools, breeder reactors, waste immobilization plants, waste storage areas, uranium or thorium mines and milling plants, etc. Therefore, there are a number of “entry-points” for terrorists in India to launch nuclear or radiological terror.

Nuclear pessimists argue that the history of man-made and natural accidents in nuclear power plants of even the most developed states like Japan, the USA and Russia cannot be entirely ruled out. Therefore, in developing and more fragmented States like India, which also has a less developed operational security system, such accidents pose a grave threat.¹²

During the last few years, a series of intelligence reports have revealed that terrorists could target India’s nuclear infrastructure. According to Charles D. Ferguson:

India’s extensive nuclear complex both in the civilian and military sectors already presents a target rich environment. Moreover, India has ambitious plans for a major expansion of this complex. This expansion could increase the risk of accidents, attacks, or sabotage. Without adequate quality controls in training, the risk of accidents increases and, even with high quality of training, a rapid influx of workers into the nuclear program increases the probability of saboteurs entering the program.¹³

So, there are strong perceptions that terrorists may launch an attack on Indian nuclear facilities. India has several types of nuclear facilities that may be particularly vulnerable, including nuclear power plants, plutonium production reactors, research reactors, spent fuel storage areas, high-level radioactive waste storage facilities, and reprocessing plants.¹⁴ There are three terrorist (nuclear) threat scenarios in India:

1. Terrorist Attacks on Nuclear Facilities
2. Terrorism and Inter-State Conflict
3. Radiological Terrorism

It should be noted that nuclear or radiological terrorism constitutes a significant danger in India. The growth and

expansion of terrorism/ insurgencies across the country has been a serious threat for India. Its growing nuclear capabilities would result in the form of nuclear or radiological terrorism in the future. The danger has been nurtured and reinforced by the escalating level of terrorism in the State, the growing sophistication of terrorist methods of operation and attack, the large expansion of civil nuclear programs in India and the increasing availability of portable, sophisticated weapon systems like shoulder-fired rockets that can be used with great precision to strike nuclear installations.¹⁵

Policy Recommendations

- India is facing terrible domestic challenges in the form of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, separatist movements, poverty and other social vulnerabilities. The global community must address India’s nuclear security issues in the context of domestic as well as regional instability.
- India should begin a program like the US Continuous Behavior Observation Program. Further, it should increase security around nuclear facilities and be more open in its policies on nuclear security to reassure its neighbors.¹⁶
- The US and the Nuclear Suppliers Group should seriously observe the domestic and regional security dynamics of India before further nuclear engagements.
- The Personnel Reliability Program should be improved.
- India’s future nuclear development should be controlled to mitigate against the above specified dangers.

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Endnotes

- 1 Charles D. Ferguson, "Assessing The Vulnerability of the Indian Civilian Nuclear Program to Military and Terrorist Attack," in Henry Sokolski (ed.), Gauging U.S.-Indian strategic cooperation, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007, p.132.
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