

Security manifesto



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[Sreeram Chaulia](#) 4 February 2014

The year that we leave behind has been a trying one for India's security, exposing chinks in our armour and asking questions about how prepared we are as a nation to fend off threats. Although we have not been buffeted by as much horrific violence as some other international hotspots, varied forms of vulnerabilities and weaknesses persist in India and leave us fearful and worried as a nation.

2013 was worse for India than the previous year in terms of terrorism. The targets ranged from a crowded marketplace in Hyderabad to political party offices and rallies in Bengaluru and Patna. Even the holiest of shrines of Buddhism, the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya, was not spared. A headcount of casualties (injured and dead) from terrorist bomb blasts across India this year throws up a cumulative figure of nearly 250 persons. If one were to add the spectacular Maoist attack in the Darbha Valley of Chhattisgarh that targeted one mainstream political party, the tally reaches 300.

For a nation of 1.2 billion and our size and diversity, cynics would say that more lives are lost in road accidents or because of tobacco consumption than to terrorism. But the foreign networks that motivate, arm and send terrorists to undermine the Indian state and our social cohesion through hatred-driven killings are the Number 1 threat to our national security.

Over the years, Indians have become inured to terrorist attacks on soft targets. Terrorist attacks where our agencies lose the trail and fail to prove the provenance or provide clarity about the perpetrating outfit abound. Each time we hear of some deadly blast, the collective Indian psyche cringes and links it to a memory chain of previous attacks whose plotters are possibly still at large and planning their next hit.

The one big success for Indian national security in 2013 was the arrest of the leader of the dreaded Indian Mujahideen (IM), Yasin Bhatkal, through cooperation of the authorities in neighbouring Nepal. It followed high-profile extraditions of IM operatives from Saudi Arabia in 2012. But with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh openly admitting that "there is a likelihood of attempts by terrorist groups to disrupt the forthcoming elections", none can be assured that more attacks are not en route.

The IM may be eventually neutralised, but there are other religious fundamentalists and extremists who can fill its shoes and continue the mayhem. If the Awami League loses power in Bangladesh in 2014, India can expect a two-front jihadist assault, both on the western and eastern borders.

The government's claim that 99 per cent of terrorist plots are being preempted does not give Indians a sense of the scale of the threat they confront. Suppose a total of 500 separate or serially interconnected attacks are planned in a given year, and if the intelligence and security agencies are foiling 99 per cent of them (a tall order in itself), that means as many as five or six attacks are guaranteed to occur and terrorise us physically and psychologically. We have to inculcate absolute intolerance for these assaults, develop stronger interdiction projects on foreign terrain where terrorists arm and train, and initiate better state-society information exchange methods to defeat the scourge.

Apart from terrorism, a more conventional cause of insecurity rose to worrying prominence in 2013. This was the 800-pound gorilla on our northeast, China. The deep incursion of a Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) platoon, 19 kilometres inside the Indian portion of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) near Daulat Beg Oldi, sent shock spirals across India. To the credit of Indian diplomacy, we managed to secure a Chinese pullout from the disputed site after nearly three weeks of nerve-wracking tension. But what has

heightened insecurity in India since that incident is the lack of understanding as to why the Chinese thrust so far inside our territory and why they inexplicably decided to evacuate.

One China specialist in our security establishment told this author that the best guess was that Beijing was using the limited ingress into Ladakh to test our political will and military capabilities on the ground to repulse the logistically stronger PLA. Whether it was a war game or plain Chinese pinprick to show India its place as tactically inferior and reactive, 2013 has sown more fear in the Indian mind about China's malefic intentions. The Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) that was recently signed might help manage the problem, but our security along the LAC is tenuous and subject to the whims of the inscrutable Chinese.

The image of the menacing dragon — as an occupier of our territory that is also trying to geo-strategically hem us in by influencing our neighbours — got a lot more vicious this year. Total national resolve and clarity that China is a conventional foe in the security realm (while being an economic partner), and subtle counterbalancing moves in step with other Asian powers chafing at Chinese bullying will need to be the top priorities for Indian diplomacy in 2014.

This year also brought home ugly truths about America's National Security Agency (NSA) spying excessively on the Indian government and citizenry through cyber hacking and telecommunication interception. In the cyber warfare realm, it does not matter whether the enemy is authoritarian China or democratic America. Both pose huge challenges to our security and call for aggressive monitoring of American and Chinese diplomatic infrastructure in India, as the embassies and consulates are believed by our tech warriors to be the terrestrial hubs from which critical information pilferage is being organised by foreign powers.

The ever-annoying specter of sexual violence, the disappointing economic slowdown, and dirty politics which fuel inter-religious rioting were other major causes of insecurity in India this year. 2014 will be no safer if we do not see all these different factors as contributors to one net final effect — national and human insecurity.

In the New Year, let us generate public debate on structural flaws that make India insecure, viz. geopolitical encirclement or "strategic confinement" as former defence minister Jaswant Singh labels it, our much-reviled "soft state", our bureaucracy-heavy security and foreign policy apparatuses, and our callousness towards the lives and dignities of fellow Indians. A higher level of public consciousness about security failures and solutions is the noblest New Year resolution and aspiration.

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