

Caught Napping!

Intelligence on CBRN Threats

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The world is turning toxic with increasing proclivity to Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) threats due to enhanced trade and globalisation. International community needs to come together to reduce such risks and take preventive measures against them. However, that can be only be done if we understand these threats and their National Security implications. Getting timely inputs of emerging or likely threats can help prevent such incidents and save lives. Thus, CBRN Security needs to be factored into our intelligence mechanism.

The Need

Covid19 Story. The Covid19 crisis began in Wuhan, China in Nov 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO), on 31 December 2019, announced that a pneumonia like disease was affecting many in China. It was only on 30 Jan 2020 that the WHO declared a "public health emergency of international concern". It took two months from the onset for the world to recognise Covid19 as a Global pandemic. By end Feb, there were nearly 84,000 cases worldwide and increasing by the hour.

Nearly all nations failed to understand the likelihood of it becoming a pandemic. Even when cases were being reported in other parts of the world, very few assessments were carried out enabling considered actions to ward off the disease. The gross lack of intelligence on the virus and its anticipated spread, apathetic actions on lessons learnt from similar incidents in the past and exercises/simulations (Clade X pandemic simulation exercise by the US is a case in point) compounded by sheer lack of understanding of proactive actions has led to the virus becoming a pandemic. As of 27 Nov 2020, there have been more than 6,13,68,500 infected and 14,38,750 Covid19 deaths worldwide.

The Beirut Explosions. 04 Aug 2020 saw two massive explosions rip most part of Beirut city. Reports state that the explosions were from nearly 2750 tonnes of Ammonium Nitrate stored in warehouses at the port. Reports indicate that the store was a possible Hezbollah cache. Post the Beirut explosions, news of tons of toxic chemicals stored at Indian ports like Chennai, Vizag and others have emerged.

Many terrorist organisations have recently shown interest in use of CBRN material for coercing governments to accept their demands. Smuggling of CBRN material, pilferage from laboratories and industries, supply chain interdiction and clandestine research and manufacture of CBRN agents has been prevalent for a few decades. Many intelligence agencies across the world are seized of this issue. Yet, many incidents do happen.

Most of the actions have been reactionary. Do we have no advance inputs? Could we not have seen it coming? Do we monitor such happenings in our neighbourhood or anywhere in the world? Do we have a structured mechanism for intelligence gathering and analysis on Chemical, Biological and Radiological incidents? Are we geared to systematically initiate actions and capabilities to proactively meet the challenges of such incidents? If we are, then we seem to have failed in preventing and minimising the crisis. And if not, then we need to seriously review our strategy and our intelligence system.

The Paradigm

For the above, India needs a strong comprehensive National CBRN Strategy and a National CBRN plan that would lay down the actions, capabilities and capacities required to be put in place to meet such challenges. Such a plan would spell out the tasks of various agencies and entities which can gain CBRN intelligence. Had this been in place, we would not have been found wanting in terms of inadequate testing facilities, ventilators, PPE and masks. Even Hospitals, Healthcare facilities and administrative machinery were found to be totally unprepared for the pandemic.