

Security Trends: Bangladesh 2018

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Synopsis

The year 2018 will be an important period for Bangladesh. Concerns will revolve around the national general election which is due at the end of 2018. What are the possible security threats in 2018 and how will they affect the security of Bangladesh? This commentary seeks to address these questions.

Commentary

With the memory of the event of Holey Artisan Bakery still fresh, the year 2017 was comparatively stable. Adroit measures from law enforcement agencies kept militant groups in check. However, in 2018, we may see a shift in this trend. The country may experience instability and disorder from various insecurities (security risks) notably from electoral violence, Rohingya crisis, and militancy and terrorism, etc. We have to keep in mind that what will happen in 2018 cannot be precisely predicted and pointed out as in the case of pure science. In fact, trend analysis of security issues depends upon a number of complex variables that makes it difficult to formulate an accurate prediction.

Electoral Violence

The next general election will likely be held at the end of 2018. Historically, the politics and elections in Bangladesh are extremely confrontational and violent in nature. Hartals called by opposition parties often lead to street-fighting and violent clashes. However, the year 2017 was comparatively stable and peaceful with few occurrences of hartals. This trend may take a complete reversal in 2018 with the chance of much higher violence. Violent clashes between the political parties will intensify as the

election comes close. Unless there is a consensus among major political parties about the nature of interim government and the method of conducting the election, we could see a return to political violence and instability. That will make the country's already fragile democracy critically vulnerable.

Militancy and Terrorism

With the shocking memory of Holey Artisan Bakery in mind, there was a high speculation that militant incidents would equally persist in 2017. However, the operational activity of militant groups has been controlled to a great extent as law enforcement agencies have made over hundred 'counter terrorism' related operations and raids throughout the year. However, the militant groups are still alive and active. Often large cache of arms are being seized in different parts of the country. With the national election approaching, we may see an upsurge in militant activities in 2018. One point to note here is that the next general election will be the first election held on the backdrop of recent upsurge in domestic Islamist militancy. Some of the militant groups publicly denounce democracy as being unapproved in Islam. Hence, as a manifestation of democracy, the general election may be targeted. Banned groups like Hizbut-Tahrir and JMB publicly denounced elections. Hence, during the days before and after the general election we may see an upsurge of militant activities in the country.

Rohingya Crisis

Rohingya crisis has been the most significant concern for Bangladesh in 2017. The crisis will remain a grave security concern for the country in 2018. Initially, when the Rohingya exodus was pouring into Bangladesh, people's emotion was running high for the sufferings of the oppressed Muslim brothers and sisters. With time, this sympathy will come down as the local people adjacent to Rohingya camp area will feel that they are somehow affected by sudden presence of such a large influx. At this, the crisis may backfire with the local people retaliating against Rohingya population. Currently, the process of repatriating Rohingyas is going on. The deal is so complicated and slackening that this is unlikely we could see a complete repatriation soon. Moreover, further violence in Rakhine state will push more Rohingya people to Bangladesh. With limited resources, there are a number of security implication for Bangladesh. The

responsibility of feeding such a large population primarily falls on the country's shoulder making the food security of the country at risk. While establishing Rohingya camps, according to the District Commissioner's Office of Cox's Bazar, around 3500 acres of forest have already been occupied. Shelters were also made on hilltop and hillside cutting down trees there. The natural environment and ecosystem of the region are thus at grave risk. As Rohingya people were long repressed and have recently gone through a traumatic situation, they are not like usual people. Consequently, they are prone to petty crimes which will adversely affect the law and order situation of the region. Most of the Rohingya families came to Bangladesh without their male family members. As a result, they may fall prey of multinational trafficking gangs. They may also be used as the carriers of drugs and small arms. The gravest concern is that local and international terror groups will find a fertile ground to carry out their recruitment of militants as Rohingya population are on the fringe deprived of basic human rights. Therefore, if the repatriation process of Rohingya population does not happen immediately, it will have long-lasting effect on the security of the country.

Climate Security and Disaster

Being a climate vulnerable country, Bangladesh will continue to remain vulnerable in 2018. The chances are high that natural disasters will occur more frequently with prolonged flooding, heavy cyclone, and intense saline intrusion. The global temperature will continue to increase and weather pattern will keep changing. Bangladesh is also vulnerable to potential earthquake. Since our cities are not built on proper planning with almost zero capacity in earthquake management, the fear of an earthquake disaster is hovering over our head. A powerful earthquake centering near Dhaka city will cause one of the worst disasters in the history.

Cyber Security

Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable in terms of cyber security. Most of the critical cyber information infrastructure are weak with low level of capacity. Regarding cyber security, the country will remain vulnerable in 2018. Bangladesh Bank fell prey of a massive cyber-heist. Majority of the stolen money still could not be recovered. Moreover, all over the world cyber-attacks are on the rise. The threats from cyber-

attacks are difficult to control as tracing the cyber attackers are almost impossible. The elections are specially targeted by the cyber attackers. We have seen that the recent US election has been allegedly manipulated by Russia-based hackers. As 2018 is the election year of Bangladesh, we could see an upsurge in data manipulation, information warfare, and targeted fake news. This will drastically affect the already vulnerable cyber space of the country.

Financial Security

The banking sector and stock market will continue to be volatile in 2018. In recent years, we have seen the semi-collapse of the stock market and large-scale loss of funds from public sector banks. Some banks particularly state-owned banks performed miserably in terms of non-performing loans and poor governance. Currently 'Farmers Bank' is defaulting to its depositors. With poor governance and corrupt management, the same trend might happen in other banks with potential for domino effect in financial sector. If this trend is not contained on an emergency basis, it may trigger a financial collapse and subsequent social unrest negating the steady economic achievement of Bangladesh for the past decades.

Impact of Regional Tension

In 2018, Bangladesh may unwillingly be the victim of regional tension. For several months last year, India and China were at absolute standoff over Doklam, a tiny stretch of land near Bhutan. A potential spark could turn the standoff into a conflict. Though the conflict is primarily resolved for now, we may see a renewed tension in 2018. A Chinese state-run newspaper hinted for a more aggressive approach over Doklam in future. Hence, the tension between these two emerging super powers may rise again in 2018. The concern for Bangladesh is that Doklam region is within less than 90 kilometre from Bangladesh border and located in the Siliguri corridor which is, from strategic point of view, of immense significance to India. The corridor is a lifeline for India to connect with its Northeast region. Thus, due to Bangladesh's geographical location and bilateral relations with one of the conflicting sides, we may unwittingly be affected by potential India-China conflict.

Conclusion

In contrast to a stable 2017, a number of of insecurities are likely to affect Bangladesh in 2018. While addressing the security threats, a comprehensive approach is required. Contingency planning should be formulated at all levels if everything does not go as planned.

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