The lone wolf threat: on isolated terror attack in London

Context

# The knife attack at a park in Reading, a town west of London, which killed three people and injured three others, is yet another reminder of the threat of lone wolf attacks the U.K. is facing.

Lone wolf attacks in Britain

# Last November, the British government reduced the official threat level from “severe” to “substantial”, which means attacks could happen but there was no intelligence of an immediate terror strike.

# Since then, the country has seen three major incidents.

# In November, Usman Khan, 28, who had been jailed for terror offences, killed two with a knife at the Fishmongers’ Hall, London.

# In February this year, a 20-year-old was shot dead by police when he launched a knife attack in south London. A 25-year-old Libyan national has been arrested in connection with the latest incident.

# British media have reported that Khairi Saadallah was on the MI5’s radar. He was investigated as the intelligence community got a report that he was looking to travel abroad to link up with terror outfits.

# The investigation closed for lack of evidence. But he is now in custody for the Reading attack, which has been declared a terror incident.

What is a lone wolf attack?

# Lone wolf attacks, in which extremist individuals translate their beliefs into violent actions, are hard to detect and prevent.

New challenge for the Intelligence agencies

# In coordinated terror attacks, the chances of competent intelligence agencies detecting the perpetrators are much higher. To their credit, the U.K.’s intelligence wings have foiled dozens of terror attacks since the devastating 2005 London bombings that killed 52 people and injured 700 others.

# But the U.K., especially London, continued to see low-tech lone attacks, where the attacker either used vehicles to run over people or launched knife attacks.

Terrorist organisations new tactic

# Terrorist organisations had also embraced this tactic to spread violence in countries where coordinated big attacks are impossible.

# When the territories it controlled in Iraq and Syria started shrinking in the wake of counter-
attacks, in 2015 and 2016 the Islamic State urged its supporters first to launch attacks in western cities and then declare allegiance to the ‘Caliph’.

# In 2017, Khalid Masood, a British citizen, drove a car into pedestrians on the pavement of Westminster Bridge and stabbed a police officer.

# He killed six people and injured 40 others before being shot by police.

# Lone wolf attacks continue to pose a security challenge to the public and the government. In all the last three knife attacks, the attackers were known to the agencies.

Way ahead

# The government and the security agencies need to adopt a multi-pronged approach towards radicalisation, which is anchored in human intelligence, strong ties with communities and community leaders and deradicalisation programmes.