Counter-terrorism in South Asia: New Threats Call for Deeper Cooperation

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ABSTRACT With the foreign forces drawing down in Afghanistan, there is an inevitable loss of focus on the threat of terrorism in the highly vulnerable region of South Asia. But almost every country in the region, barring Bhutan, continues to confront the challenges of terrorism and insurgency. Yet there appears little sense of the danger posed by terrorism, and its 'new' forms that ride the wave of technology and the collapse of traditional state structures. The story of counter-terrorism in the region has been that of individual countries crafting distinct strategies to deal with a problem which has long ago gone trans-national. Attempts at crafting a regional approach have not been absent but sporadic and ineffective. This paper argues that the unfolding new wave of terrorism poses a far greater threat than the countries in South Asia have faced before and will therefore need a more integrated, regional approach to counter it effectively.

INTRODUCTION

The terrorist threat to South Asia has never been as acute as it is today. The region, home to more than one-third of humanity, has more terrorist groups and terrorists, than any other part of the world. More lives have been lost in this region to terrorist attacks than anywhere else in the world. At least five countries in the region— Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives—face serious threats from a melange of terrorist groups active in the region and elsewhere. Barring India, the other four face a threat to the very nature of their state if terrorism is not contained.

Two unfolding events in the immediate neighbourhood could greatly enhance the dimension of the threat. One, the US and other western countries have been drawing down their troops from active deployment in Afghanistan. NATO forces departed in December 2014. The US has a much smaller presence in the country than before and is likely to move its troops out over the next two years. Two, West Asia is witnessing a major confrontation between different terrorist forces and countries, taking a heavy toll on lives and property. The conflict has already triggered an unprecedented migration crisis in Europe.

The rapid rise of a new terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the re-emergence of al-Qaeda in West Asia as well as South Asia, further magnifies the terrorist threats in the region.

NATURE OF THREAT

Pakistan—and to a lesser extent, Afghanistan—have been part of an "epicentre" of terrorism for decades, with the former involved in exporting terrorism and the latter used by other powers as a base for both for internal terror and its export, primarily to the West. Terrorist groups, on their own or sponsored by states, have operated in these countries long before the Afghan *jihad*. Pakistan-supported terrorist activities and attacks against India have been witnessed in Kashmir, and elsewhere in India, since the early 1990s. After the *jihad* in Afghanistan, several groups returned to their home countries, spawning new terrorist groups. Bangladesh and Pakistan are two apt case studies. In Pakistan, many of these terrorists either went autonomous or joined the ranks of the state-sponsored groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). These state-supported groups were principally anti-India and set up a wide network of underground and legitimate supporters in Nepal, Bangladesh and Maldives, besides India. These groups in turn legitimised killing in the name of religion and became willing tools in the Pakistani Army's campaign to snuff out any dissent within the country and foster terrorist violence against India. As expected, these activities have led to a serious blowback within Pakistan in the past eight years. Pakistan today ranks among the three countries in the world—Iraq and Afghanistan being the two others—most affected by terrorism.

The Afghan *jihad* returnees to Bangladesh, referred to as the Bangladesh Taliban, created different groups to further the extremist agenda of converting Bangladesh into an Islamic state like the Afghan Taliban had done in Afghanistan

in 1996. Two of these, Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jamat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), have survived and achieved notoriety. Both have been involved in scores of terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, including the 2008 serial blasts aimed at Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Despite a severe crackdown ordered by Prime Minister Hasina in the subsequent years, remnants of these groups have survived and formed new groups like Ansar-ul Bangla, Ansar-ul Islam and Hizb-ut Tawhid. In recent years, Bangladesh has also witnessed the slow but steady expansion of the transnational extremist group, Hizb-ut Tehrir (HuT), among the urban intelligentsia and youth.

In the Maldives, the situation has recently taken a turn for the worse. For long, there was a struggle between democratic forces and extremist ideologies in this island nation, with the former gaining the upper hand a few years ago. Although there have been instances of Maldivians joining al-Qaeda, the island nation itself had remained unaffected by terrorism. This has changed in the recent years with extremist forces coming to the fore in the political turmoil that has gripped the country. There are now credible reports of ISIS gaining support among the youth with some young people travelling to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside the terrorist group.

India has been battling terrorism for over three decades now, much of it sponsored by Pakistan. Homegrown *jihadi* groups, likewise supported by Pakistan, have carried out several attacks in India. The most devastating attack, however, was carried out by LeT in collaboration with the Pakistani Army targeting Mumbai in November 2008.

In addition, al-Qaeda and ISIS are now attempting to expand their influence in the region. The ISIS has set up a Khorasan chapter in Afghanistan to carry out terrorist activities in the region stretching from Iran to Bangladesh. Al-Qaeda had announced the formation of a separate chapter

dedicated to the Indian sub-continent—Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent—in September 2014. The Al-Qaeda chief, Ayman al-Zawahari, in a statement, picked out Bangladesh as its centre of focus. Although both these groups have had little success in the region, their activities will need to be watched as they may succeed in consolidating their influence in the coming years. Murderous attacks on bloggers and foreign nationals in the recent past, some claimed to have been carried out by ISIS, have renewed fears about Bangladesh becoming a staging ground for groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS in the near future.

DEFINING THREATS

Besides the rise in the number of terrorist groups, the region has also witnessed a growing sophistication in their modus operandi in recent years. The Mumbai attack (November 2008) clearly showed how a terrorist group, most certainly with state support in this case, can easily subvert traditional security measures, both in the maritime domain as well as on land, and keep a more powerful country engaged in a prolonged state of fear and anxiety. Likewise, terrorists operating inside Pakistan have shown an extraordinary ability to engage and attack Pakistan's highly secure military and intelligence infrastructure in recent years. They have also exhibited a high level of training, capability, and commitment while targeting a professional military force.

The developments in Afghanistan-Pakistan and West Asia will have their own impact on the kind of threats the region faces today or in the coming years. The following are some of the threats which can be foreseen.[1] There may be others which cannot be predicted, only because terrorists are today more unpredictable than in the past and states confronting these groups often are complicit with them.

Return of 'foreign' fighters: Various estimates put the number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria at over 15,000 drawn from over 80 countries, including those in South Asia. These men and women, mostly young, have joined the ISIS to capture and hold territory, and support the brutal regime of ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared himself Caliph in early 2014.[2,3] A sizeable number of them are likely to return to their countries of origin either disappointed by the ISIS culture or as sleeper agents to recruit, raise finances and carry out ISIS activities. The possibility of these returnees setting up ISIS franchises, or joining al-Qaeda, or going independent, remains high. There are already signs in Bangladesh and Maldives of the ISIS or the AQIS instigating local affiliates to carry out attacks. Similar instances of Afghan *jihad* veterans setting up new terrorist groups in their home country have been well documented. In South Asia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and to some extent India, have suffered from this blowback.

New Global Jihad: The emergence of ISIS, and al-Qaeda's renewed attempts to expand its footprint across Asia by setting up AQIS,[4] as well as reviving its old links with groups like Harkat-ul *Jihad* al Islami (HuJI) and Jemaiah Islamiya (JI), mark a turning point in the global jihadist campaign. It is possible that ISIS may face severe attrition in leadership and capabilities over time, leaving al-Qaeda and its affiliates to regain some of their lost ground. ISIS, however, will continue to be a potent threat to the region and beyond as long as several countries in the region, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia, continue to bolster the group. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, is likely to benefit from the withdrawal of foreign forces[5] in Afghanistan and consolidate its position in South Asia and its immediate neighbourhood. The presence and activities of both these groups as well as that of the Taliban, Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Tayyeba is likely to give a new momentum to the global terrorist campaign.

Homegrown Jihad and Lone Wolves: The expanding swath of Islamic terrorism in Africa, Asia and large parts of Europe has raised the

possibility of 'homegrown jihad' sprouting in many more countries. The threat comes not only from returnees but sympathisers as well – the Sydney hostage situation[6] and the Paris attack of January 2015[7] point to this grave possibility. In Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with its base in the tribal areas and support bases in Punjab, Balochistan and Sindh remain a serious threat to the state and its people. In India, the Indian Mujahideen and various smaller outfits remain a potential threat. Although these groups have suffered significantly in recent years, the possibility of their cadres joining hands with either ISIS or AQIS or form new coalitions remains high.

Individuals getting indoctrinated on the internet and joining terrorist groups, or carrying out attacks independently, remain the most serious threat. Some of the groups like HuJI-B have had past association with al-Qaeda and could carry out subversive activities at al-Qaeda's behest. The ISIS is also trying to secure a foothold in the country which is increasingly becoming politically unstable, in the process encouraging radical elements to come to the fore in national politics, giving groups like ISIS to find more than a foothold in the country.

Cyber war and UAVs: With terrorist groups likely to infuse 'surprise' elements into their attacks, using more lethal methods to cause maximum casualties and projecting brutality through social media and other communication tools to magnify their clout, many groups with cyber capabilities could take the war to the next level – a cyber-attack on the vulnerable networks of a state. Some of these groups can potentially outsource cyber-attacks to any one or more of the several hacking groups on hire. Groups like al-Qaeda and LeT are likely to adopt such a strategy. The potential targets are likely to be Indian and US interests in South Asia. Both al-Qaeda and LeT have also experimented with pilotless aircraft and commercially available drones to enhance their terrorist capabilities, but the deployment of these

instruments is handicapped by the need for a sophisticated command and control centre and their extreme vulnerability to detection and countermeasures. The use of these instruments therefore remains a remote possibility in the near future.

Dirty Bombs: Some terrorist groups have been experimenting with Radiological Dispersal Explosives for quite some time and have shown their intent to use these dirty bombs as part of terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda and IS are most likely to use them.[8] Other groups like LeT may have the capability to launch similar attacks but will be deterred by the severe repercussion that may follow for their patron states. These dirty bombs could, however, be used by terrorists acting alone or part of solo suicide missions. The number of engineers and technically qualified persons joining terrorist organisations has been on the rise. ISIS has several professionals in its ranks who manage refineries, banking, communication and other infrastructure requirements. The LeT has a large number of science students and technicians trained in colleges run by the group in different parts of Pakistan. These groups have access to radiological materials used in medical equipment and have the knowhow to rig a dirty bomb without scouting for materials from external sources.[9]

Radical cleavage: The increasing reach and capabilities of terrorist groups with extremist ideologies will lead to a greater level of extremism and intolerance in many countries. These groups can be used by Salafi groups to advance their agenda of Sunni consolidation in the Muslim world, creating more fissures within the community as well as in the larger society. The incessant sectarian violence in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan is likely to spiral further, bringing an even wider arc of the Muslim world into the maelstrom. Terrorist violence will also deepen the cleavage between Muslims and non-Muslims in countries where Muslims are in the minority or are migrants. These fissures are already visible in some of the European countries; these divisions

are likely to be exploited by transnational extremist groups like Tablighi Jamaat (predominantly in South Asia), Hizb-ut Tehrir (its influence extends from Europe and Central Asia to South Asia) and various other smaller but equally insidious groups active in individual countries.

COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

The broad contours of the terrorist landscape in South Asia today point to the serious inadequacy of the domestic counter-terrorism (CT) strategies adopted by individual countries in South Asia. The trans-national character of contemporary terrorism has made individual or bilateral efforts ineffective in many ways. Traditionally, countries in the region have tackled terrorism by strengthening internal counter-terrorism mechanisms. Instances of bilateral cooperation have been few and far between, and at best have had mixed results. Such cooperation between the CT agencies of India and Pakistan, and Afghanistan and Pakistan, seems, realistically speaking, unattainable.

Attempts at regional cooperation on terrorism have been hostage to bilateral rivalries and animus. For instance, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could have become an effective platform to counter the rise of terrorism as early as in the 1990s. There was such acute awareness and concern among the member countries about the impending fallout of the Afghan Jihad on the region that, in November 1987, they signed a Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (SCST) which called for greater regional cooperation on legal issues, including evidence sharing, extradition and exchange of information and expertise.

Unfortunately, these initiatives remained confined to paper. Two primary reasons for the failure of these measures were—a) the political leadership neither exhibited any foresight or any determination to effectively implement the

agreements in letter and spirit; and b) the convention laid undue emphasis on military means to contain terrorism without resolving the fundamental question of how such operations could be executed without infringing the sovereignty of nations where terrorist groups were located. This dilemma became more acute when countries treated terrorist incidents as 'internal matters' or accused neighbouring countries of supporting terrorist groups. The role of intelligence agencies and armies of certain countries in supporting and sustaining terrorist and extremist groups stymied the Convention even before the ink on the document dried up.

However, after the 9/11 attacks in the US, there was renewed interest among the member countries to explore ways and means of cooperation in matters of crime, drug trafficking and terrorism. In 2002, for instance, an additional protocol was added to the Convention which, in the wake of UN Security Council Resolution 1373, included the issue of terrorist financing, calling for the immediate criminalisation of collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts. SAARC also created a Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) in Colombo (Sri Lanka) to collate, analyse and disseminate information about terrorist tactics, strategies and methods. Other key CT initiatives included setting up of a Drug Offences Monitoring Desk (SDOMD) and an Expert Group on Networking Among Police Authorities (NAPA).

The extraordinary rise in global concern about terrorist groups and their activities following the 9/11 attacks and other terrorist incidents in different parts of the world gave additional impetus to SAARC counter-terrorism initiatives. For instance, in 2005, at the 13th SAARC summit in Dhaka, it was decided that Home/Interior Ministers of member countries would also meet annually, in addition to the annual meetings of Home/Interior Secretaries.

A series of meetings convened by different sub-groups within the Convention in the last five

years has shown how seriously the member countries are now taking the issue of terrorism. One notable feature has been the concerted effort to expand the scope of cooperation beyond the parameters of the Convention itself. The fourth meeting of the SAARC Conference on Police Matters at Colombo in April 2011, for instance, discussed among other issues, the proposal to set up a SAARCPOL, an Interpol-like regional institution, a regional police force and a SAARC Institute of Criminology. India has proposed an internet-based police network among member countries.

The meeting saw Sri Lanka and Bangladesh sharing their experiences in tackling crime and terrorism. Bangladesh also offered to run a programme on tackling organised crime. Sri Lanka offered a training programme on the Strategic Management of Counter Terrorism at the Sri Lankan Police College. In 2010, India had extended a similar offer of training programmes at the National Institute of Criminology and Forensic Science, New Delhi.

A healthy supplementary to this regional effort has been some fruitful bilateral cooperation. A good example has been the cooperation extended by Bhutan to India in dismantling the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) safehouses and training camps. In 2003, the Royal Bhutanese Army not only targeted the group's infrastructure in Bhutan but also arrested several Bhutanese for supporting and aiding ULFA. The inclusion of a Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism in the Composite Dialogue between India and Pakistan in 2006 could have been a major step towards countering terrorism in the region. But the attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and the Mumbai attack in November 2008 carried out by terrorist groups operating out of Pakistan put an end to the initiative. A more positive and recent example of sincere cooperation was provided by Bangladesh when it carried out, against many odds, operations against anti-India insurgent and terrorist groups holed up in the country. The

Awami League government's commitment to fight terrorism in all its forms is noteworthy.

These enhanced levels of cooperation have reduced misgivings to some extent, but the fact that the region, particularly India, has had serious terrorist incidents shows how ineffective in reality has been the cooperation mechanism. To illustrate this glaring flaw in the framework, take for instance, the SAARC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty signed in August 2008, which was expected to facilitate cooperation among member countries in areas like counter-terrorism investigation, and prosecution and extradition of terrorism suspects. But after the Mumbai attack of November 2008, despite consistent Indian requests, Pakistan refused access to the main suspects lodged in its prisons, leave alone taking action against the leadership of LeT.

NEW CHALLENGES

Having analysed, however briefly, the current CT cooperation in South Asia and the nature of emerging threats, two questions call for a response. One, do such bilateral and regional initiatives provide effective deterrence to terrorist activities in the region? Two, is there a need to expand the scope of CT cooperation at both regional as well as bilateral levels?

Although there has been some progress in CT cooperation in the region, there have been delays and differences in achieving consensus on these initiatives along with an absence of committed and determined political will. These impediments have, in large measure, undermined the principal objectives of preventing terrorist attacks and degrading and dismantling terrorist infrastructure in the region.

This failure has made the challenge of addressing the present nature of terrorist threats even more difficult. Five key concerns have remained largely unaddressed at the bilateral as well as regional level. These are: cyber security; higher probability

of chemical, radiological, biological and nuclear (CRBN) attacks; maritime threats; expanding terrorist sanctuaries; and homegrown terrorist networks. These are the common terrorist threats and challenges for the region. These, therefore, require a comprehensive framework of cooperation to address them. Piecemeal, ad hoc arrangements as discussed and agreed upon in the past will prove to be counter-productive, pulling the region deeper into an insecure and unstable future.

In a world networked so extensively and with the power of social media growing exponentially, the issue of cyber security, in all its manifestations, today presents a serious challenge to security. What magnifies the gravity of the challenge is the overall deficiency in awareness and capabilities among countries in the region. There is, therefore, an urgent need for the countries to share information and experiences in dealing with two key aspects of this threat—cyber-attacks on infrastructure and information systems and the use of cyber capabilities by terrorist groups to recruit, raise funds and carry out attacks in the region. Besides enhancing bilateral cooperation, a regional centre on cyber security could provide a platform to study, analyse and discuss solutions. A good beginning could be made by setting up a cyber cell within the SAARC Secretariat and agree upon an additional protocol on the subject.

No less critical are the CRBN threats, particularly the possibility of dirty bomb attacks in the region. Although terrorist and insurgent groups have not made such threats, the possibility of some of them, or those trained by them, using radiological materials, easily available, to carry out dirt bomb attacks cannot be discounted. These threats have become more acute, as discussed in the earlier sections, in view of the growing political instability and economic crisis in the region.

On the above two issues, there is an obvious need to engage with the international community,

particularly the United States, where considerable policy research has been carried out in these matters. The US, for instance, could share its experiences in dealing with cyber as well as CRBN threats and also help the member countries in capacity building.

The issue of homegrown terror and terrorist sanctuaries likewise needs to be high on the agenda of discussion at the regional level. Considering that both the issues are 'politically sensitive', the level of engagement among the regional countries should be deep and sustained. Terror sanctuaries pose not only serious threats to the home country but also to neighbouring countries. Likewise, homegrown terror poses an equally complex challenge to most of the countries in the region. There are 'domestic' as well as 'trans-national' factors influencing homegrown terror in the region and therefore require a highly nuanced and segregated CT approach. Regional cooperation, however, is critical in ensuring that these homegrown terror networks do not use neighbouring countries to transit, procure weapons, move funds or take shelter.

CONCLUSION

Past failures should not be allowed to become a deterrent to future cooperation. In fact, failures and failings can yield valuable lessons to craft viable mechanisms for CT cooperation. The countries in the region, without exception, realise the need for capacity building in CT. Considerable progress has been made on many of these fronts but a great deal more needs to be done. The political leadership of the region must seize the initiative and ensure that the conventions and covenants agreed upon are implemented in a given timeframe. The changing dynamics of terrorism in the region call for a faster response from the states. Newer forms of threat need fresh insights and resolutions. Delays in creating an effective framework against terrorism, in all its manifestations, could seriously undermine the

collective effort to live in a stable and progressive environment. There has to be a regional commitment to tackle terrorism with a clear unambiguous definition of terrorism and what constitutes terrorist activity. The region will not make progress in dealing with this ominous threat unless it learns to handle these threats unequivocally.

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ENDNOTES:

1. Much of this analysis is drawn from Wilson John's presentation made at ORF-ECC conference on developments in West Asia organised by ORF in March 2015 at New Delhi.

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