

Dealing with the Problem of Terrorism in South Asia

- Brig. Gen. (retd.) Arun Sahgal

Introduction

The specter of transnational terrorism has risen from peripheral issue of 1980's to one of the foremost security challenges facing the SAARC region collectively. There are periodic highs and lows in the states in the grip of terrorism. Terrorism has ceased to be the domestic phenomenon, where few disgruntled elements committed acts of violence that were primarily aimed at gaining publicity and showing the state in bad light. The aphorism that *“terrorists want a lot of publicity and not a lot of people dead”* exemplified the typical operating patterns of the past. Hostile/terrorist groups avoided targeting patterns that would earn them the hostility of the populace, and indeed did everything to ensure that cause and objectives they espoused had a degree of legitimacy and sympathy among them. By and large, terrorist groups had clear political ends, and operated within generally well known and defined patterns. Terrorism thus was largely committed to serve political ends and evolved and grew as a separate activity of violence distinct from war or conflict. Terrorism as we see it now has a specific organisational structure with extraordinary destructive capabilities and the readiness to sacrifice themselves.

Most actors in the present day have no geographical base, generally operate trans-nationally and sub nationally. Osama-bin-Laden and his loosely knit fellow adventurers stretch from Philippines to Morocco; they operate with ease from their sanctuaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Similarly Taliban in Afghanistan is regrouping to fight the US forces and their NATO allies having suffered earlier during operation Enduring Freedom. Not only this. Their focus has now shifted towards Central Asian Republics, Xinjiang in Tibet and, to a limited extent, J&K. Similarly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are afflicted by the scourge of terrorism both of home grown and transnational variety. On our Western borders Pakistan is a unique case; at one level it is an US ally in their fight against global war on terrorism having changed their priorities in 2001/2002. On the other it continues to support and fund trans-national terrorism against India as an instrument of state policy. What is worse, having ridden the terrorism tiger it now face the

wrath of some fundamentalist and religious extremist elements that it helped spawn in the first place leading to large scale ethnic and terrorist violence.

It is not the intention to apportion blame or earn brownie point about state support to terrorism or how some countries are providing sanctuaries to fundamentalist and other elements etc, but to highlight that all most all nations of the region are afflicted with this problem. What is worse and a trend that we need to reflect upon is that of increasing linkages of regional terrorism with that of international terrorist outfits exemplified by the appearance of large numbers of foreign terrorists. What is making matters worse is that today the terrorists are not only operating at a more lethal level, causing far more indiscriminate damage and casualties, but are also organised on more structured lines, with transnational leverages in terms of sophisticated weapons, communication technologies and above all funding. In fact some refer to terrorist outfits as multi national corporations that have their operational basis all over the world with terrorist leaders acting as the CEOs of these corporations. This can be seen in terms of increasing links between organized crime, drug trafficking and their ability to generate large volume of funds leading to an increased sophistication in both weaponry and communication.

Interestingly ideology itself is undergoing a change with, *religious fundamentalism* becoming as the main motivating force and taking primacy over the *Marxist/Leninist* doctrines. Added to above is the political dimensions of the problem, as a consequence of which terrorism and extremism are being used as a weapon to create dissensions, instability and undermine legitimate political institutions. Yet another dimension is that of ethnic element of conflict and its linkages with trans-national or national terrorist formulations.

Causes of Terrorism

The cause of persistent existence of terrorism is all due to the substantial difference in the living standards and the varied cultures, ethnic, religious or other groups. Its striking political character helps it draw so much attention. The complex interplay of domestic, regional and international factors prepare the acting ground for this most potent threat to security. This region is composed of societies deeply fragmented by their caste and community; and with linguistic, regional and cultural differences. They are enormously unequal and inequitable. The mixed administrative and political baggage in

the states of this region make way for the manifestation of discontent in terms of violence which has consistently escalated over the last half-century.

Reasons for the rise of terrorism thus range from unfinished agenda of partition, ethnic inconsistencies, extreme poverty and accompanying deprivations such as unemployment, low levels of literacy and limited access to health services; accentuated by mis-governance, brutal suppression of human rights and the alienation of whole cultural or ethnic groups brought about by threat to life by frequent communal violence, destruction of means of livelihood, not to forget the pre occupation of ruling elites in self perpetuation and their own political consolidation all giving way for the suffering numbers to survive on their own. The additive to all this is religious extremism in the form of fundamentalist indoctrination. Religious fundamentalism has been unabashedly pitted against communism.

The growth of international terrorist movements has been linked to the willingness of some nations to directly or indirectly sponsor campaigns of terror, often through proxies and other means. State sponsorship of groups has strained relations between India and Pakistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Bangladesh and India. India's Naga and Mizo insurgents received training in China, but the military assistance ended after the death of Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung. Pakistan's continued state sponsorship of terrorism in J&K continues to cast its shadow on the on going peace process. This is qualified by discernable increase in terrorist violence in the valley during the summer of 2005.

Foreign support has also contributed to the heightening of the salience of national security concerns, aggressive nationalism and militarism in the region. What is worse South Asian countries have themselves spawned, encouraged, aided and abetted terrorism in neighbouring countries. That is why border areas have become the familiar arena of terrorism in most of these countries and terrorist groups operating in a particular country have links with ideologically similar groups active in the neighbouring country, offering of sanctuaries, training facilities and allowing sovereign territories to become conduit for supply of arms and funds to militant groups. It is these disruptive influence that are the greatest threats to the regional security. Ironically, threat of terrorism or militant challenges has often been used as an excuse for undermining democracy and an increasing communalisation of society.

Most of the internal security crises that plague South Asian states have a cross-border dimension, and many are inter-related. However what is important is to note that each one of them have India centric dimension. Thus, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the persistent ethnic problem in Sri Lanka, the increasing use of Bangladeshi territory by Islamist extremists, the proliferation of small arms, and the menace of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism, each has significant transnational dimensions. Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal also continue to engage with the problem of having to deal with terrorist and extremist organisations, as well as subversive elements, based on their soil, which ironically all operate against India.

The destabilization that followed the demise of Cold War equations and the emergence of conflicting international '*strategic interests*' in the region, particularly post 9/11, and a shift in the nature of international conflict, have all exacerbated regional tensions. Extra regional interests have entered sub continental equations, further exacerbating regional tensions. A range of 'irregular' 'low-intensity' wars are the most prevalent manifestation of inter-state confrontations. Terrorism is at the very heart of this new global conflict – low -cost option with a high cost-benefit ratio.

Regional Implications of Terrorist Violence

The stability of South Asia, and the success and failure of initiatives for the resolution of existing conflicts will depend on the exploration of new ideas, ideologies and strategies that provide concrete and effective, appealing, alternatives to violence.

In the South Asian context, political violence or structural violence perpetrated by the state against its own people cannot be exonerated. Regarding violence by the state as lawful leads to the bizarre situation where outside powers can, by invoking the so-called doctrine of intervention on humanitarian grounds, act against the state while its own people cannot rise in rebellion against it. Moreover, in South Asia, states have lost their monopoly over violence mainly because of the rise of non-state perpetrators of violence. Having failed to control these forces, the states have co-opted them, and even aided and abetted them, for suppressing democracy within and unleashing terrorism against neighbours.

Thus, in South Asia, terrorism appears to draw its strength from several factors.

1. Ability of groups to work across national frontiers. When subject to hot pursuit, or out of choice, terrorists often are able to easily cross national borders. Some groups have sanctuaries across the frontiers. Insurgents in India's northeast frequently flee through porous borders into Burma or Bangladesh. Sri Lankan Tamil militants cross the narrow Palk Straits separating their island from south India in boats despite Indian naval patrols. In J&K hilly and difficult terrain has been exploited for years for trans border movement of terrorists and militants. Taliban and Al Qaida cadres in Afghanistan move across their country's frontier with Pakistan at will. The growth of transborder terrorism in south Asia carries an inherent danger of extremists inflicting casualties on people of different nationality or ethnic identity.

2. Technological sophistication. Use of highly sophisticated, offensive weapons. Make the terrorist better equipped than state police. Information technology in fact has lend a helping hand to the terrorists to create global organisational networks and in the process making them self sufficient. Such networks grow on the organised crime financially aided by rich fanatics or the misled, and the religiously oriented intellectuals.

The induction of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of sophisticated arms for the Afghan rebels, and the movement and use of large quantities of those weapons beyond the originally intended frontiers, have left a long-lasting scar on some societies in South Asia. It is the flow of these arms into the hands of terrorist elements in Pakistan and India that is a cause of immediate concern. The illicit trade in these weapons could make Pakistan a potential shopping center for terrorists from the Middle East, West Europe and elsewhere.

Impact of Terrorism

Scourge of terrorism has had an adverse impact on domestic political and social structures in South Asia. It has encouraged fundamentalism, militarism, chauvinism and a distinct lurch towards right-wing extremism. Consequently South Asia remains one of the most volatile regions of the world. Terrorism has adversely affected development and imposed heavy economic costs on most of the South Asian countries. Today South Asian states are among the poorest in the world, and are generally at the bottom of Human Development index and as per reports of Transparency International highest in corruption levels

What is often overlooked is that whereas the direct costs in terms human casualties, collateral damage in the nature of the destruction of infrastructure, factories and standing crops and stoppage of economic activities are high, the indirect costs are even higher. Later are in terms of both social and economic costs arising out of loss of near one's, fear of relocation, and impact on education, dealing with trauma of terrorist or state perpetrated violence. Above together with, general loss of confidence in the economy and the consequent inability to attract foreign investment, brain drain, enhanced military expenditure, high transaction costs, leads to economic distortions impacting economic growth and causing instability. Though various quantitative estimates have been attempted of the economic costs of terrorism, these exercises have suffered from serious limitations due to the problem of double counting and of isolating the terrorist factor from other relevant factors.

Drug- Trafficking. Although extortion, "protection" fees and bank robberies are important means to finance terror, drug trafficking is beginning to play a key role -- one that conceivably could bring an organization the financial means needed to acquire materials for WMD blackmail and terror. Pakistan and Afghanistan are major narcotics suppliers to the West, similarly North East has become a major conduit of illegal drug supplies from the heroin and other drug factories relocated on the Myanmar-Manipur border. Today terrorist groups are seeking a large slice of this lucrative commerce since they are better equipped to face the high risks that are involved.

The willingness of political extremists to undertake suicidal terrorist missions reflects the phenomenon of "holy terror." Admiration of "fidayeen" or martyrs is widespread among disaffected groups or sects in the Middle East this phenomenon appears to be creeping into South Asia as well. The halo of martyrdom that surrounds terrorist elements is a key factor in the brutal killings of civilian bystanders or collateral damage aimed at creating mass terror. Terrorists have little regard for the safety of civilians and many groups sanction the killing of ordinary citizens. But unlike the mass ethnically-oriented targeting of civilians carried out by several South Asian groups, most terrorist organizations elsewhere attempt to select their targets of attacks with a degree of discrimination.

WMD Terrorism. The belief that terrorist groups would not target nuclear installations or try to steal weapons-usable materials for fear of arousing mass anger in society may be valid to some extent if the terrorists are widely seen as sensitive to public reaction and are selective and discriminatory in

their tactics. However with the introduction of foreign mercenaries and fundamentalists of Al Qaeda variety it is not difficult to conceive of several situations where extremists operating beyond their national frontiers may be tempted to create a major crisis and disaster by sabotaging an atomic facility. The technology of terrorism has become sophisticated, and such a strike is possible.

Overseas connections can help domestic terrorists to learn new tactics of terror and obtain technology for nuclear-related terrorism. Because no region can be insulated from terrorism trends in another part of the world, advanced technologies of terrorism, like detonation of explosives by remote control, can readily be transferred to new groups. There is also the danger that the large human traffic and close relations between South Asia and the Middle East and the former soviet republics of Central Asia might spur ominous links between international terrorists and South Asian extremists. The longer terrorists are involved in underground campaigns, the more brutal and hardened they tend to become. And the greater is their desperation to attract national and international attention to their cause.

Also, the general tendency toward centralization and personalization of political authority in South Asian countries has increased the inability of state structures to accommodate ethnic concerns, fueling unrest and violence. Political leaders should continue to search for solutions to the problems of terrorism in South Asia, but it would be only over-optimism to expect an early end to those problems.

State Response to Terrorism

Military option has generally been the preferred mode of response by the South Asian countries to deal with terrorism. Terrorism is primarily seen as a security issue that requires military response. This is exemplified by varying degree of use of force by all SAARC nations afflicted with terrorism. However the Indian experience has been that while military force is essential component to contain terrorism, it is equally important that space so created is exploited politically in terms of addressing public grievances and the underlying causes. In short military action without good governance is an exercise in futility. It is this underlying philosophy that has guided counterinsurgency operations by Indian security forces. They unlike others have scrupulously refrained from use of disproportionate force in terms of heavy weapons or air power, keeping collateral damage to the minimum.

Political Accommodation or peace accords have been another method to deal with insurgencies. Aim has been to deal with the issue politically through negotiations while buying time to address underlying socio political causes of the conflict. This approach has essentially been a follow up of military options and has helped in in containment of insurgency. Mizoram and the Chittagong Hill Tract accord are two recent examples as also perhaps number of ceasefire entered into by India and other SAARC countries with any number of militant groups. An important lesson that has emerged has been the need to honour political commitments and seriousness in implementation. CHT Accord is a classic example. While the accord put an end to more than two decades of armed insurgency, but it failed to bring sustainable peace to the region as both the governments of the Awami League and the present alliance did not show seriousness to implement the essential features of the Accord.

Yet another response mechanism has been third party mediation: Norway's mediation in the Sri Lanka peace process is an example. Norway was invited as a mediator by President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The intervention, however, failed to produce any tangible result. In 2001, Norway was re-invited as a third party mediator by Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe. The peace dialogue continues the strands of which have been picked up by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, under the Tsunami relief plan. Although many rounds of peace talks have been held with representatives both from the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government; the process has failed to produce lasting results essentially due to certain basic contradictions in the approach that has affected public perceptions. Even today political consensus eludes the Sri Lankan government inspite of strong international backing.

Civil society intervention: A lot has been talked about civil society organizations and their role in peace building and peace making in conflict theatres. A number of civil society organizations have attempted to involve themselves in track II diplomacy between India and Pakistan. However, mostly the civil society has either been absent or has played only a subsidiary role in such situations. However a relatively higher degree of civil society role has been witnessed in India's Northeast. The Church played a significant role in bringing the Mizo insurgency to an end in 1996 and has also brought the NSCN-IM to the negotiating table. Similarly civil society activities have also been noticed in states like Manipur.

Recommended Strategy

Basic issue that needs to be addressed in the above backdrop is how to collectively combine regional energies to deal with the growing problem of terrorism. From our discourse it would be clear that use of military force alone will not suffice it can be at best an enabling instrument. Issue needs to be addressed collectively and a coalition approach developed. Attempts to use terrorism or militancy to stoke disruptive fires will not work. What is required is recognition of the fact that terrorism can not be a substitute to deal with state failure or lack of governance. Both are equally disruptive and in the long run destabilising. The SAARC countries both the governments as well as the peoples have great stakes in resolving the problem of terrorism which requires collective approach.

South Asia continues to live in the paradox of being one out of two of the world's most poverty stricken regions. The region has let itself be bedeviled by bilateral, cross border conflicts between member states. There is a need for collective action first in the containment and ultimately elimination of terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering and the illegal movement of both weapons and terrorist elements.

The Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism adopted in 1987 together with additional protocol adopted during Islamabad Summit in January 2004 can provide broad frame work for collective action to deal with the problem of terrorism. The purpose of this Additional Protocol which is in tune with Security Council Resolution 1373 is to strengthen the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, particularly by criminalizing the provision, collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts and taking further measures to prevent and suppress financing of such acts. Development of agreed strategies at the regional level to widen the scope of the Convention and provide it with stronger authority is essential to combat the problem of terrorism more effectively.

As mentioned earlier a multipronged strategy to fight this menace with honesty and greater dedication is required. Some aspects of this strategy could be;

- Partnerships to coordinate our actions to ensure they are mutually reinforcing and cumulative. This will require building national institutions and capabilities required to exercise authority over respective territories and fight terrorism where it exists. Nations

should stop using terrorism as a construct of national policy to wage proxy war.

- Use all instrumentalities ie diplomatic, economic, information, law enforcement, military, financial and intelligence to defeat and destroy terrorist organizations. In fact nations should adopt zero tolerance policy for terrorist activities within their borders. A SAARC based coalition of the willing is required.
- In dealing a body blow to terrorist outfits a three tier approach is recommended;
 - Expand law enforcement effort to capture, detain, and prosecute known and suspected terrorists.
 - Focus both military capacities and specialized intelligence to defeat terrorist networks regionally.
 - Cooperate regionally and with international institutions and organizations to aggressively eliminate the source of terrorist financing.
- States that choose to harbour terrorists for whatever reasons must be held accountable for their actions. The strategy outlined above is based on collective responsibilities of states to fulfill their obligations to combat terrorism, develop military capabilities either on their own or encouraged by other SAARC states to develop these through assistance and support. Lastly and importantly aggressively deal with sources of terrorist financing.
- Within the above construct SAARC countries must aggressively collaborate to prevent terrorists from acquiring capabilities to use chemical biological radiological or nuclear weapons or even high yield explosives.
- Need to adopt common approach towards drug trafficking and organized crime. Vast sums of money continue to be laundered through international crime syndicates and terrorist organizations. This money provides huge sums of virtually untraceable funds for arms trafficking and migrant smuggling etc.
- In pursuance of above objectives all SAARC nations need to affirm adherence to UNSCR 1373, international counterterrorism

conventions and protocols. An aspect that we need to reflect upon is the issue of sovereignty vs enabling environment to fight the menace of terrorism in terms of rule of law good governance and democratic ideals.

Affirmative Action

In implementation of above strategy a focused affirmative action plan is required that takes cognisance of the need to address this issue in concrete terms and prevent it from becoming a mere rhetorical policy enunciation. First and foremost, we must all agree to a common definition of terrorism. One countries terrorist can not be other's freedom fighter. Second nations will need to strengthen their national legislations to deal with the problem. Here some sort of uniformity would be required, to facilitate extradition and related provisions. Third evolve a common grid to share information on terrorist activities, money laundering etc. Develop joint training and technical capabilities to fight money laundering, gathering intelligence etc.

SAARC has to adopt a more proactive approach to deal with the issue; there is an equal need to address the deep-rooted causes of the phenomenon of terrorism. The rectification of injustice sought with acts of violence, itself raises issues of ethics in terrorist violence. There is a need today to desperately study and understand the true causes of terrorism and terrorist movements. It must be noted that terrorisms apart from causing untold misery have essentially failed in their political aims. Terrorist violence has not led to solution of any outstanding problem.

Concluding Observations

An effective vision is required to bring together the separate sets of aspirations into one collective, composed of the multi-faceted aspirations of each community, living freely and proudly with its own separate identity, which could co-exist symbiotically with the other entities, to compose a harmonious and united entity. The lack of such a vision has given rise to groups in many countries to try and enforce, often by violent means, their own specific identities.

Double standards will not resolve the long-standing problem of terrorism. The use of force directly by a State or through encouraging other terrorist movements to use violence against an enemy State or group may temporarily

contain a terrorist movement. But these methods have proved to spread and intensify violence. The challenge before SAARC is to recognise terror and political violence as the main enemy of modern society. Saying this will not be sufficient. It should lead urgently to identifying the causes for terrorism in each member states and in the composites that go to make each member country of SAARC. The aim is to basically find ways to *frustrate* the objectives of the terrorists.

The biggest sources of terrorism in the world today are local conflicts that have had a spill over effect. They generate a dangerous mixture of extreme ideologies, organised crime and humanitarian disaster. The involvement of transnational terrorist groups has transformed these conflict ridden areas into breeding and training grounds for terrorists.

Education has been a controversial factor in the growth of terrorism. Religious institutions and schools like Madrasas have proliferated due to the neglect and the failure of the state school system. But education implies much more than formal literacy programmes. Civil society has a two pronged role in this regard - not only to highlight the inadequacies and problems that exist with the Madrasas education and pressurising the government to speed up its educational reforms but also to engage in the process of education and literacy programs especially for the poor. A number of NGO's have been active in the field of education but a lot still needs to be done.

The war against terrorism is also a war of ideas and civil society can be a source of liberal and moderate ideas that can challenge the terrorists on the intellectual plane. Therefore it is very important to recognise and promote the works of moderate scholars. Civil society debates on religion and religious tolerance can go a long way in countering the ideology of the radical elements. In this regard, the Madrasas education in the Islamic countries has come under sharp scrutiny and criticism on account of preaching hatred and promoting a violent religious ideology that justifies suicide bombings.

It is only when the state and the people work together and there is a sustained interface between them, can they respond to terrorism in a manner that is most effective and long term. Nothing can affect terrorists more than the critique from the moderate Islamic forces that reject his fanaticism and religious intolerance.