

Combating Terrorism in South Asia: Challenges and Prospects

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Introduction

Terrorism is a highly controversial issue in contemporary international politics. In effect, the controversy exists over its nature, causes and consequences with no efforts by the scholars to come to any conclusive opinion on the subject. Notwithstanding this, terrorism is nowadays considered as a threat to global peace and security, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. True, while there is the problem with respect to defining terrorism, less controversy exists with respect to the “forms and manifestations” in which it takes place, and all such types are well documented by the UN.

It should be mentioned that the forms and manifestations of terrorism do not follow a stereo-typed pattern. The factors that generate it, and the violence which characterize it are varied in nature. As a result, each pocket of terrorism varies from the other in its origin, types and methods. What then is the nature of terrorism in South Asia? The question raised attains more pertinence as in the aftermath of 11 September the focus of the international community has shifted to this region due to increasing influence of numerous religious extremist and terrorist activities in the area. Also, historically, South Asia is viewed as a region of protracted animosity due to a host of reasons like political, ethno-cultural and religious conflicts of various nature, occasional terrorist activities with cross-border ramifications, illegal trafficking of small arms etc. The region, therefore, remains politically volatile with the potentialities to threaten peace and stability in the areas both within and beyond it. Needless to mention, recurring ethno-religious problems in India, in particular in Jammu and Kashmir, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Tamil problem in Sri Lanka, series of bomb attacks in Bangladesh, each with a set of different security implications for the region, have drawn the rapt attention of many in recent times. The region’s proximity to Afghanistan – the hideout of the *Talibans* – is also a factor to be reckoned with in so far as combat against international terrorism is concerned.

What, perhaps, is more important to take note is that, in most instances, the terrorist activities that plague South Asian states have cross-border dimension mainly due to the fact that their origins and causes interconnect and overlap political boundaries. Quite dismayingly, the governments in South Asia have taken very little initiatives to combat terrorism in their respective countries, either individually or collectively. The result being that the countries of the region, i.e., Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, Nepal continue to remain bogged down in terrorism, and that too at an alarming rate. In this

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light, the main purpose of this article is to discuss briefly the nature and complexities of terrorism in South Asian countries and to suggest some ideas as to how the countries can combat the menaces of terrorism through appropriate policy measures.

A common strategy is suggested as the countries of South Asia share many commonalities with respect to history, tradition, culture, religion and other spheres of life and they can share their experience within the framework of SAARC. Despite this, counter terrorism measures have not been properly explored in the region as yet. In this connection, while there has been the lack of initiative on the part of the governments, initiatives from the civil society or the media in combating terrorism have not been that forthcoming either. For example, in South Asia, over the years, media has played a negative role in fuelling various kinds of political violence, communalism, jingoism and terrorism through propaganda, media blitz and hype. Identifying the root causes of negative perceptions about the various ethnic groups and religions through creating new ideas and avenues may help South Asian region to take a concerted effort to fight terrorism and religious extremism.

Dynamics of Terrorism in South Asia

Empirical evidences abound in South Asia to demonstrate that the terrorism in the region is mostly ethno-religious oriented. This is because of the misperception, apprehension, mistrust and tension that exist between and among various nationalities and communities. This negative phenomenon has its roots in the region's complex history, culture, religion, tradition, social norms and customs. While in most cases, the mentioned factors pull the communities towards unison, there are occasions when the same unifying factors divide the communities along ethnic and religious lines. Unfortunately, political elites more often than not exploit this divide as safe passages to their power and legitimacy. Added to this is the uneven socio-economic and development process, based on political opportunism and exclusion that acts as key factor in creating instability in the region. In such a scenario, most of the South Asian nations have faltered on their nation building process, thereby leaving the politics of the region a hostage in perpetuity to political, economic and social chaos and confusion. As Rita Manchanda observes, "the nation building process in South Asia, has been focused on forging nationalists identities based on the politics of exclusion, walling in people in a confrontationist agenda, with implications for minorities within the state and for external relations."¹

To further elucidate the above viewpoint, it can be stated that States in most of the South Asian countries have failed to ensure the basic needs of their citizenry, which has resulted in the creation of several dissatisfied groups in their respective societies. Communalism, corruption, political discrimination – all these are responsible for resorting to the terrorism and violent means in societies. Socio-economic factors like hunger, poverty, joblessness, trauma have created inhuman conditions and given rise to the need to break the shackles of extreme want through extreme actions.² Some of the ongoing crises in the

¹ Rita Manchanda, "A South Asian Media when there is no South Asian Consciousness!" paper presented at a seminar on "Towards a free, fair and vibrant media, organized by the The News, 1-2 July 200, Islamabad.

² Amera Saeed, "Terrorism: The South Asian Experience", *Regional Studies*, Autumn, 1999, p. 47.

region like the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka, the separatist movement in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir,³ the sporadic communal violence in India etc. are the few examples to vindicate the viewpoint that social, economic, political and cultural deprivation can lead to conflicts that can attain serious intensity with all possible avenues of terrorism. In all such cases, two underlying factors are visibly discernible, first, people become more sharply aware of their common identity and people become increasingly resentful about their unjust and unequal status in comparison with other groups. The sense of resentment is usually based on inequalities and denial of people's rights and opportunities.

Terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11

The event of September 11, 2001 is, in the opinion of many analysts, observers and researchers, a vantage point from where the international community, henceforth is required to look at global politics and security, economy, sociology and philosophy from an entirely new perspective. The newly sought outlook towards these important aspects of global life has been rationalized on an argument that terrorism would continue to threaten in perpetuity many established norms, values and institutions of modern civilization with serious consequences for world peace and stability. Global security paradigms and concepts have changed in the wake of after 9/11 realities. "A state's principal threat may no longer be another state, but rather shadowy sub-state-or even trans-state – networks of individuals, weapons and financing."⁴ Like shift of security paradigm, shift of terrorism has also occurred, we now witness shift from ideologically sponsored terrorism to religious extremists sponsored terrorism.

A number of scholars in the post 9/11 period have taken unbridled liberty in directly equating terrorism with Islamic militancy, extremism or fundamentalism. What has probably fomented this liberty is the fact that the terrorist attacks on September 11, are alleged to be committed by a band of Muslim radicals belonging to I group. It is no denying the fact that as a dangerous ideology, *Al-Qaedaism* is spreading in many parts of the world and making lives difficult for common Muslims around the world. But with the new Muslim element in the equation of terrorism, there came the eventual onslaught on the entire Muslim world that in the eyes of many appeared to be the breeding ground for all contemporary terrorist activities.

While terrorist acts, by all logical conclusions, constitute a crime against humanity and call for a combat against it by all quarters, the U.S. reaction, in particular to the phenomenon draws one's attention. In this connection, three elements in the U.S. policy are, indeed, mind arresting. *First*, a virtual equation of the post 9/11 version of terrorism with Islamic militancy, extremism or fundamentalism by the U.S. leaders. *Second*, by

³ In South Asia, two formidable spots of ethnic conflict are Kashmir in India and LTTE-led insurgency in Sri Lanka. The terrorism in Kashmir can be classified under the category of communal contenders who consider themselves among a number of culturally distinct groups that compete for a share in political power. The Tamil, on the other hand, are ethno-classes, who are distinct minorities, who occupy distinct social strata and have specialized economic roles in the societies.

⁴ Michael Rifer, "SADC and Terrorism – Where is the regional strategy," *African Security Review*, 14 (1), 2005, p. 108

defining the war on terror as a war against radical and militant expressions of Islam, the U.S.A has taken a wide-angle view of the Muslim world.⁵ *Third*, the U.S. seems to have deviated from its earlier segmented or ‘country-specific policy’ towards the Muslim world. Many scholars tend to argue that in the post 9/11, the U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the entire Muslim world seems to be following a unified goal.⁶ While it is unfortunate that many Western countries have started sharing similar views, South Asian countries should understand that terrorists have no religion other than doing harm to the mankind.

Combating Terrorism and Regional Cooperation in South Asia

The agenda of SAARC which encompasses a wide range of social, economic and cultural aspects affecting the life and welfare of the citizens has also taken many steps with regard to terrorism in the region. Some of these are mentioned below⁷:

- Working paper presented by Bangladesh: SAARC Study Group Meeting on Terrorism: June 12-14, 1986, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Report on Study Group Meeting on Terrorism, June 12-14, 1986, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Working Paper prepared by Bangladesh: SAARC Expert Group Meeting on Terrorism: Sept. 20-21, 1986, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Report of SAARC Expert Group Meeting on Terrorism, September 20-21, 1986, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Second SAARC Summit in Bangalore, Nov. 17, 1986, Draft Declaration to Combat Terrorism
- Third SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, Nov, 4, 1987 – SAARC Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism.
- In the Eleventh Summit in Kathmandu (January, 2002), the leaders of the SAARC have taken a pledge to make collective efforts to stamp out terrorism.

An additional clause was added to the SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism in the 12th SAARC summit. All such measures embody and give a regional focus to many of the well-established principles of international law in combating terrorism. In brief, all the member states are committed to extradite or prosecute alleged terrorists thus preventing them from enjoying safe havens. Regional cooperation is also envisaged in preventive action to combat terrorism. Exchange of information, intelligence and

⁵ M.A. Muqtedar Khan, “Nice But Tough: A Framework for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Muslim World”, *The Brown Journal of International Affairs*, Spring 2002, pp. 355-362.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See for details, Satyavir Singh, “Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in South Asia: Challenges and Policy Options,” *India Quarterly*, July-December, 2002.

expertise are among the areas identified for mutual cooperation under all conventions. Cooperation among Liaison Officers (Anti Terrorist Law Enforcement Officers) has been developed through holding international meetings continually at regular intervals to monitor, evaluate and improve counter-terrorism strategies.⁸

The SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) has been established in Colombo to collate, analyze and disseminate information about the terrorist incidence, tactics, strategies and methods. It deplored all terrorist acts for their ruinous impact on life, property, socio-economic development and political stability as well as on regional and international peace and cooperation.⁹ Unfortunately, the member states of the SAARC have not made any serious effort to implement the SAARC Convention on Terrorism. There is, therefore, the need to see how terrorism is being tackled in other regional bodies or areas outside SAARC.

International and regional cooperation is required to fight terrorism. One of the most effective measures taken by the UN against terrorism so far is resolution 1373 (28 September 2001) of the Security Council through which a number of mandatory decisions were taken on terrorist financing, obligating states to refrain from providing support to terrorists and to take necessary steps to prevent financing of terrorism and deny safe haven to terrorists. With this resolution the counter-terrorism committee has been established, to which all member states report on the steps they have taken to implement this resolution.¹⁰

Many regions of the world have taken initiatives to fight terrorism which South Asia can take note of. The Organisation of American States (OAS) has formed an inter-American Committee against terrorism (CICTE) which is charged with facilitating information exchange, creating proposals for strengthening anti-terrorism legislation, assisting members in ascension to, and compliance with, all relevant international conventions and treaties, and facilitating capacity building and training exercises for members.¹¹ The Commonwealth of Independent States has taken a more direct approach to combat terrorism. Its anti-terrorism centre (ATC) houses a database of terrorists, terrorist organisations, and terrorist financing structures and is to coordinate anti-terrorist operations.¹² Another regional organisation is Southeastern European Cooperative Initiative (SECI). Its member states adopted the Bucharest Declaration on the Suppression of Terrorism, which created a working group Anti-Terrorism Task Force (ATTF) that incorporates three sub-groups, focusing on the trans-national issues of anti-terrorism, small arms and light weapons, and weapons of mass destruction.¹³

⁸ See, Amara Saeed, "Regional Cooperation at the Track II Level: Cracking The 'Genome' of Intergovernmental Processes," in Shaheen Afroze (ed.) *Regional Cooperation in South Asia: New Dimensions and Perspectives*, published by BISS, 2002, p. 408

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Beenish Hafeez, "Understanding and Combating Terrorism in South Asia", *Regional Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, Spring 2004 p. 103

¹¹ Michael Rifer, *op.cit.*, 2005, p. 111

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Analysis of other regional anti-terrorist efforts reveals several themes. “One, obviously, is the recognition that terrorism is a regional security issue. Additionally, each is related to a state-level political agreement, ensuring the full participation of member governments. Each is to serve as its respective regions’ central clearinghouse of terrorist and anti-terrorist data. Each is to assist members in capacity-building and training programmes. Each is to assist in the legislative strengthening and harmonisation of the region. And each has actual physical centre, staffed by real people and charged with a real mission – the creation of a cooperative, coordinated and comprehensive regional anti-terrorist strategy.”¹⁴

Long-drawn and concerted efforts are required to combat terrorism in the age of globalisation and communication revolution. South Asia should join the global community to identify international terror networks and should take strong initiatives. They should develop effective intelligence and counter-intelligence system. Religious extremists should be countered. In fact, religions can be used positively in influencing public attitudes against terrorism in South Asia.

Outlook for the future

SAARC countries should bear in mind that there would be no economic development without giving proper attention to the political issues – both at the national and regional levels. This viewpoint is shared by all experts. For instance, only a couple of months ago at Wilton Park Conference on “South Asia: What are the benefits of regional cooperation?”, it was observed that: “Political differences between states have bedeviled South Asian regional co-operation. Some believe that internal constraints, such as political instability or conflict, poor governance, the growth of fundamentalism, inroads into judicial independence and media freedom, corruption and lack of transparency, are also serious impediments. Without attention to these political issues, there can be no sustainable economic development.”

Sri Lankan President, Ms. Chandrika B. Kumaratunga said “I believe honestly and strongly that the most effective response to conflict and terrorism is to root out the causes that generate them. The causes of these conflicts and the form they take whether it be terrorism or otherwise, must be studied and understood in a scientific and objective manner. The people of South Asia need to engage urgently in this exercise. South Asia has failed to emerge, even after half a century of independence, from cataclysmic intra-national divisions and conflicts. South Asia is home of the world’s most feared terrorist groups – Al Qaeda and the LTTE.”¹⁵

Finally, it can be said that states which are charged with maintaining public order have now become helpless spectators vis-à-vis terrorism. In contrast, a South Asian civil society now seems to be evolving with a growing support for regional cooperation with

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ First Madhavrao Scindia Memorial Lecture on April 23, 2002. Quoted in Rajender Singh Siwach, “Etiology of Terrorism in South Asia”, *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, Volume 15, December 2002, No. 2

or without governmental support. This includes the social movements that champion human rights, environmental protection, social justice, conflict resolution and peace building outside traditional political structure. These social movements and their networks can play greater roles in promoting human centered social, economic and cultural relationships in South Asia and hence regional cooperation. This group can also act as a powerful body to sensitize the issue of terrorism in the region, its deleterious effects on the lives of people, their well-being and hence on regional cooperation as a whole. Alongside, the role of media is essential for management of terrorism in South Asia. Currently, the private media and the government media are not in harmonious terms. Both need to be on cooperative terms in tackling the complex issue of terrorism.