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Terrorism in South Asia

Retrospect and Prospect

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Introduction

South Asia has seen inter-state wars and intra-state violent movements during most of its post-colonial history, but its experience with terrorism by non-state actors is relatively recent as compared to other regions such as the Middle East. In the last decade or so, South Asia has, indeed, emerged as the centre-stage of international terrorism, with horrendous implications for countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are its principal victims. Even India, as South Asia's largest state, is not immune from the terrorist fallout. In fact, the emergence of terrorism as the most dominating form of conflict-generating activity in South Asia has put in jeopardy the whole regional quest for peace and progress. This paper first lays down the historical context for this demonic occurrence in the region and then explains its complex current manifestations. The prospects of South Asia beyond the present phase of terrorism, is the study's concluding subject.

It is, however, important at the start to conceptually clarify the various aspects of terrorism, in terms of their applicability to the South Asian reality. Five of these aspects are particularly worth clarifying:

Terrorism in Theory

First, terrorism is a complex subject. Therefore, it cannot be understood simplistically. We have to explore grey areas and avoid generalizations if we wish to logically understand terrorism. This means that causes and manifestations of terrorism may differ from situation to situation, bound by time and space. For instance, the conditions under which terrorism has evolved in South Asia in recent years should not necessarily resemble those that gave rise to the terrorist violence in Latin America or Western Europe in previous decades.

Second, terrorism is a highly subjective and contested term. States and scholars may have failed to define terrorism, but they do agree to its four important elements: One, terrorism is an act of violence. Two, it is deliberately undertaken. Three, its primary targets are unarmed civilians. Four, its immediate motive is to create fear. The definitional dispute is over the identity of the perpetrator. Since states have a monopoly over using violence, even though with some legally specified pre-conditions, statist and even scholarly definitions of terrorism identify only non-state actors as perpetrators. Another relatively minor issue that statist

definitions of terrorism skip, but some scholarly definitions do not, pertains to the broader motivation behind a terrorist act—which is largely believed to be political.

Third, the idea of non-state terrorism as a largely political-motivated violent activity implies that terrorists as non-state actors, just like states, are guided by certain rational choices. They employ terrorism as a means rather than an end. The end, in most cases, consists of pragmatically defined political objectives, which may include sabotaging a state's political process, scuttling its economic activity or causing inter-state conflict. The psychological effect of terror is generated through a physical act of terrorism to realise these larger objectives. The popular saying of 'one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist' also becomes less credible when we consider terrorism as an activity rather than a goal. This means that there can never be a moral justification for terrorism, whether perpetrated by non-state actors or states.

Forth, an implication that flows from the afore-mentioned definitional problem regarding the perpetrator of terrorism pertains to instances of violence against civilians committed by states. Under international law, a sovereign state facing armed insurgency may employ violent means to preserve its territorial integrity, but only if these means specifically target the insurgents. In such instances, violence committed by insurgents against not only unarmed civilians but also security forces of the state concerned may qualify as acts of terrorism. However, in the case of a disputed territory, not only can a state's use of force against insurgent forces be termed state terrorism but its claim of calling the insurgents as terrorists may also be questioned. The applicability of the charge of state-sponsored terrorism may likewise be stringent in cases where one state is accused of sponsoring non-state terrorism in another country, and lenient when one state is allegedly sponsoring terrorism in a disputed territory.

Finally, just as terrorism is a means not an end, religion has acted as a means rather than an end in most instances of international terrorism in recent decades. Neither South Asia as a region nor Islam as a religion is an exception to this reality. A particular faith can be directly associated with terrorism only when it is undertaken for a purely religious goal. This may, for instance, include acts of violence against unarmed civilians undertaken by doomsday cults of revealed faiths or by individuals and groups representing other radical religious creeds. In the

contemporary wave of terrorism, terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda have misused or misinterpreted Islam to justify violence. And, their terrorism, like other forms of terrorism in history, is motivated by pragmatic political ambitions—even if they tend to justify it in the name of long-standing Muslim world conflicts such as Palestine. However, as stated before, just because a cause pronounced by a terrorist organisation is just does not make the killing of civilians in its name morally justifiable.

Terrorism in Practice

If we start to perceive terrorism within the afore-mentioned conceptual framework, it may not be difficult to rationalise its roots and manifestations in the context of South Asia. The following five points regarding South Asia's experiment with terrorism are particularly significant:

First, terrorism is a relatively recent phenomenon in South Asia. Until a decade ago, the region did experience instances of terrorism, but their occurrence was largely a part of wars between countries, such as between India and Pakistan, or civil wars within a state like the Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka. Pakistan experienced sectarianism and deadly blasts, and India faced the 1993 Mumbai bombings. India's employment of force to crush violent uprising in the disputed territory of Kashmir did involve instances of state terrorism. If Afghanistan is also included in South Asia, then instances of terrorism did occur during the Soviet occupation and throughout the intra-Afghan infighting that followed it, including the Taliban era. On the whole, however, terrorism, especially by non-state actors, remained a sporadic activity in South Asia. It is only since the start of the War on Terror a decade ago that terrorism has emerged as the region's most dominant form of politically motivated violence.

Second, the roots of this terrorism and all of its complexities are essentially a consequence of the 1980s jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, which was sponsored by the United States and its Cold War allies. This jihad waged with Pakistan's border regions with Afghanistan acting as a launching pad for Afghan and other militants from the Muslim world. The sudden withdrawal of international support to Mujahideen following the Soviet defeat created the context for the emergence of al-Qaeda and other militant groups, and their terrorist activities throughout the 1990s and beyond. Given Pakistan's exceptional geographic, ethnic and

historical link with Afghanistan, it was but natural for the ensuing anarchy in Afghanistan to seriously impact Pakistan's fragile security, economic, political and social situation. This was especially because of the continued presence of millions of Afghan refugees in the country. Left alone to tackle the messy and complex situation, Pakistan also made a grave mistake of overlooking or even assisting the militarization of a traditionally pacifist self-determination struggle in Kashmir. Like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's bet on the Taliban to restore peace in Afghanistan failed. While in power, Taliban preferred to act independently, especially by hosting al-Qaeda and permitting its international terrorist campaign. This is a brief backdrop to the events of 9/11. The consequent international war in Afghanistan is what has brought South Asia to face the current hyper form of non-state terrorism. In retrospect, be it the critical issue of Pakistan's tribal areas acting as safe haven for Taliban-led insurgents in Afghanistan or the worrying affair of the growth of extremism and its terrorist consequences in Pakistan, the root-cause lies in the globally-sponsored Afghan jihad of the 1980s. In other words, if that concluding event of the Cold War had not occurred, the conflict in South Asia might still be confined to traditional forms of armed versus the armed and not transformed into violence by the armed against the unarmed.

Third, the complexity of the historical context for the present wave of terrorism in South Asia means that its current manifestations are equally intricate. There are a host of terrorist organizations with varied politically rooted motivations and goals. Al-Qaeda's agenda is global, specifically targeting America and its allies. Afghan Taliban's primary concern is to regain power in Afghanistan. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s motivations are Pakistan-specific, while groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyiba are traditionally oriented towards committing violence, including terrorism, in the name of Kashmir. Terrorist groups also have a nexus with criminals and drug traffickers, who wish to thrive amid a continuing security quagmire. In addition to mainstream terrorist group, the region also has relatively smaller terrorist bands, such as extreme religious and revolutionary militant outfits in India. While having differences in their principal motivations, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operating in the region share some objectives. For instance, TTP may share with al-Qaeda the potentially destructive objectives of creating political disorder and social chaos in Pakistan or ruining its economy and jeopardising the country's international standing. What may be most significant for all countries of South Asia is a common goal that connects all of these terrorist organizations: that of creating inter-state conflict or sabotaging cooperative trends among

them. Such trends include the six-year old peace process between India and Pakistan, which is derailed each time an instance of terrorism occurs, or the recent improvement in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, which terrorist organizations have spared no opportunity to sabotage. One unfortunate outcome of this rational undertaking by terrorist organisations is the blame-game that India and Pakistan or Afghanistan and Pakistan often engage in, by consistently accusing each other of cross-border terrorism, thereby directly falling into the trap set by terrorist organisations.

A fourth characteristic of terrorism in South Asia pertains to the role of the state, which again involves considerable complexity and has roots that go all the way to the anti-Soviet jihad era. Time and again, Pakistan comes under international scrutiny and consequent pressure on account of its state covertly having an alliance with the very terrorist organisations it publicly pronounces to be fighting as a frontline state in the War on Terror. However, if closely analysed, this duality issue is not as simple as its generally portrayed. If 9/11 was an example of a Frankenstein Monster, al-Qaeda, eventually haunting its own creator, the United States; there have been many instances in Pakistan especially in recent years, whereby the very organisations whose militant activities in Afghanistan and Kashmir were once overlooked or even sponsored by the country's security establishment have carried out spectacular terrorist attacks against its personnel and installations. Even otherwise, the security, economic, political and social consequences of the decade-long hyper form of non-state terrorism across Pakistan have been so devastating that it would be foolhardy and even suicidal for its civilian governmental and security establishment to cut deal with hard-core terrorist organisations with the expectation of a lasting peace. There may, indeed, be cases where Pakistan has practiced toughness towards one terrorist group and leniency towards another. However, this is largely an issue of setting different priorities due to the intricate nature of regional terrorism. However, Pakistan does share the larger global goal of defeating terrorism as an illegitimate and morally unjustifiable violent activity. The issue of state terrorism or state-sponsored terrorism likewise does not have a straightforward explanation. For instance, when Pakistani security forces attack Taliban insurgents, they cannot be accused of committing state terrorism. Moreover, insurgent attacks against them are as much terroristic as they are against unarmed civilians. On the contrary, India's employment of force in Kashmir could be labelled as state terrorism, given the region's disputed nature. However, terrorism by non-state actors victimising unarmed civilians even in a disputed land such as Kashmir cannot be

morally justifiable, even though their armed activity specifically targeting state security forces may be debatable.

A final point regarding the practical manifestations of terrorism in South Asia regards the role of religion. We often hear from suicide bombers who fail to explode and are nabbed by security forces that their motivation behind dying is to go to the heaven. Such desire may be cited as a proof that somehow religion is the end, and not merely a means, of terrorism. However, the fact is that the motivations of those who finance and train these suicide bombers are hardly religious per se. In fact, from al-Qaeda to TTP, terrorist organizations misuse the faith of Islam to justify terrorism in its name, even though their principal motivation is political. Terrorism being committed in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere in South Asia falls in this category. And those who undertake it have deviated from the righteous path of religion. That these deviants constitute a tiny minority continues to be a ground reality in Pakistan, where the volatile issue of blasphemy, and not the widening base of TTP or other terrorist groups, has recently caused a couple of high profile terrorist assassinations. The two issues cannot be confused to suggest a widening base for extremism in Pakistan. In fact, in recent years, the country's public opinion has predominantly turned against Taliban and their affiliates, because of the populist view that no cause justifies the killing of innocent civilians or even security personnel.

Response to Terrorism

Within South Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and India to a lesser extent, have been victims of the decade-long wave of non-state terrorism. For the past over thirty years, Afghanistan has seen successive rounds of warfare, with Pakistan principally bearing the cost of engagement in each such instance. By creating and conflagrating conflict in the region, the terrorist organisations rationally hope to keep its three principal nations divided. This fact alone provides enough incentive for Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the rest of the South Asian states to unite and offer a collective response to terrorism. Before dwelling on what needs to happen in Afghanistan, what more Pakistan can do in its fight against terrorism and where India stands in the region's counter-terrorism quest, it is pertinent to underline a couple of complexities underpinning the response to terrorism in South Asia.

First, the United States and other extra-regional powers may have helped Afghanistan and Pakistan to combat terrorists and fight insurgents, and provided crucial support for expanding the political, economic and social capacity particularly of Afghanistan. However, their visible preference for exercising military means in the War on Terror has simultaneously introduced potentially destabilising elements to the already complicated regional security environment. Instances of civilian casualties in NATO bombardment in Afghanistan and US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas contribute to terrorist recruitment—a process that effectively neutralises the successes already achieved in the difficult campaign to combat terrorism and fight insurgency simultaneously. At least this is true in Pakistan's case, where almost the entire nation considers US drone attacks as a violation of the country's sovereignty. If combating terrorism, in essence, amounts to winning the “hearts and minds” of extremists and their sympathisers so as to dissuade them from terrorism, then how can we presume that such instances of “collateral damage” will not create additional breeding grounds for terrorism? The role of outside powers fighting terrorism in South Asia should be to help the region move beyond terrorism not to let it steep further into the terrorist quagmire.

A second observation relates to the complexity of counter-terrorism in the region. Radicalism is a tendency that once grips a particular locality or a section of its population—say, the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan—takes time to become history. Jihad in the name of Islam has taken over thirty years, especially starting the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, to nurture itself as a regressive ideology—and military-centric international counter-insurgency campaign in post-Taliban Afghanistan may have only fuelled it further. Other complications of counter-terrorism in the region include the presence still in Pakistan, especially in its Afghan border regions, of 1.6 million only registered Afghan refugees. There is also this fact of the Afghan state still refusing to recognise the Durand Line, even while, at least until a few years ago, resorting to the dichotomous stance of levelling accusations of cross-border infiltration against Pakistan. Even otherwise, it is a widely acknowledged fact that non-state terrorism in an increasingly globalised world of today knows no boundaries. Seen in this backdrop, it is possible for a terrorist entity based in Afghanistan to stage a terrorist activity in Pakistan, and vice versa. India and Pakistan are also not immune from the cross-border tendency of non-state terrorism. This reinforces the previous point about the collective nature of the threat all countries of South Asia face from terrorism. Effectively

tackling this threat requires a joint regional response, one in which each does whatever in its capacity to facilitate, and not to complicate, the counter-terrorism task of the other.

This study's final observation pertains to what needs to happen in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, for the fight against terrorism in South Asia to succeed. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, its people have already suffered irreparable loss in successive wars, including its latest round since the end of 2001. The terrorist event of 9/11 was the reason why the United States and NATO waged the Afghan war. With al-Qaeda losing relevance in Afghan insurgency and its leader Osama bin Laden dead, the justification for military engagement of foreign forces in Afghanistan has significantly eroded. Even while the process to withdraw US troops has begun, still the timeline for the departure of all US and NATO forces from Afghanistan by 2014 is less clearly pronounced. A more promising trend in recent months is the start of the reconciliation process, with Afghanistan in the lead and Pakistan and some other countries offering due assistance for the purpose. The reconciliation process in Afghanistan also provides an opportunity to the forces of the Afghan insurgency, especially Taliban, battered by long war to compromise on the pre-conditions for peace, including renunciation of violence, dissociation of links with al-Qaeda and acceptance of Afghanistan's new constitutional and political reality. For Afghanistan's majority population, the Pashtun, who primarily constitute the insurgents, overcoming post-Taliban marginalisation in the country's security, political and economic structure should be an important incentive to make peace. However, what is important now is that at least the process to negotiate a grand political compromise in Afghanistan has effectively begun. If and when such a compromise is finally made, Afghanistan will not be the first country where organisations previously involved in insurgency or terrorism become part of the established post-conflict governance order.

As for Pakistan, it has in recent years achieved significant successes in the war against terrorism, a struggle that is far from over. It needs to build upon these successes for its own sake and that of the region, and not because of pressure from any extra-regional power. The irreparable cost of terrorism for Pakistan's security, economy, politics and social fabric, particularly the chilling fact of nearly 40,000 innocent civilians and security personnel becoming a victim of the terrorism spree, leaves the country with no option except to exhaust all possible opportunities to deal with terrorism and extremism. The recent estrangement in

Pakistan's relations with the United States may itself turn out to be another opportunity for a re-appraisal of the country's counter-terrorism approach in line with indigenous intricacies and regional complexities. Pakistan needs to proactively engage Afghanistan and India as its two largest neighbours and make them understand why it has prioritised crushing domestic terrorists over combating regional terrorists, and what each of them needs to do for removing this perceived or real dichotomy in Pakistan's counter-terrorism approach. If seriously approached by Pakistan, the two regional states may understand, better than the extra-regional players, the potentially disastrous consequences of opening multiple counter-terrorist fronts in a country whose security forces are already stretched too thin fighting insurgents in tribal areas. They may also be taken into confidence insofar as the resolution of long-standing conflicts such as over the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan or the issue of achieving rapid progress in the peace process between India and Pakistan, especially with reference to the Kashmir dispute, is concerned. Extra-regional powers' wavering commitment to Afghanistan provides the regional states greater opportunity to resolve conflicts on their own.

In the South Asian quest for combating terrorism, fighting insurgency and resolving conflict, India's role will be quite crucial. Its previous strategy of internationally isolating Pakistan on count of terrorism has not worked, and only contributed to conflagrating the South Asian conflict, which is what the terrorists want. Instead, India needs to help Afghanistan and Pakistan move beyond the current phase of insurgency-ridden war and terrorism-ridden quagmire, respectively. The political and economic dividends of such a peaceful outcome will be as crucial for India as for these two principal victims of war and terrorism in South Asia. India must also realise that the dispute of Kashmir needs to be resolved, not just because Pakistan has all along championed its resolution under UN resolutions or otherwise; but also because of the fact that as long as this conflict continues there will always be militant groups out there willing to kill and maim people in its name. Why provide terrorist organisations a cause for action? Finally, India has to let Pakistan freely deal with terrorism on the Afghan frontier and elsewhere, rather than recurrently distract Pakistani security establishment's attention from this battle by creating and sustaining another source of insecurity on the country's eastern borders. Generally speaking, if all the countries of South Asia, including India, realise that helping a regional state like Pakistan facing hyper non-state

terrorism actually amounts to helping themselves, they will stop playing into the hands of terrorists. When this happens, South Asians will have a future beyond terrorism.