4

The Menace of Terrorism and Contemporary South Asia

Abidullah Baba*

Terrorism a menace every nation-state confronts in the contemporary world order is a highly heterogeneous and amply debated field cutting across different societies. This paper seeks to highlight the rise of terrorism in contemporary South Asia by treading a different analogy. Political Islam an antecedent of colonial period did not give rise to terrorism until the cold war. The late cold war, popularized the concept of terrorism. The left over states (weak state) and their structures of bad governance in the post-cold war era aggravated the situation. The pro-democracy movements, ethno-national, sectarian and separatist movements and insurgencies have added fuel to the fire. The much hyped 'war on terror', has further worsened the situation. The paper argues that terrorism has impacted the superstructure of South Asian countries in a rather horrendous manner. Terrorism is both socio-political and economic problem. Developing a coherent counter-terror policy is imperative and hence ideal for the regional peace and security.

[**Keywords :** Terrorism, South Asia, Insurgencies, Sectarian, Separatist, Ethno-national, Counter terrorism, Cold war, Non-State actors]

* Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025 (India) E-mail: <abidabdullahbaba@gmail.com>

1.   Introduction

The South Asian region is home to one out of every three of the 1.8 billion Muslims residing globally. The region has played a crucial role, "politically, economically, culturally, and intellectually, in the history of Islam for over a millennium."[1] The security environment in the region is unstable and insecure with many conflicts lingering unresolved. The Kashmir imbroglio, the Afghan war and new forms of insurgency and many other social schims have destabilised the region, and have reinforced South Asia's status as one of the most dangerous regions in the world. More recently, with the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) or Dae'sh the region has become more a cynosure in the realm of Islamist extremism. Hostile relations between India and Pakistan, the two largest South Asian states, have been the key source of regional insecurity over the last many decades. The Afghan war has wrecked instability and utter chaos both political and social. Almost every South Asian country suffers from various degrees of internal schims, fissiparous tendencies and many other divisions, which have often led to violent conflicts with complex humanitarian exigencies. The internal schims are usually the result of competing ethno-national, religious, tribal and class identities.[2]

Contemporary day South Asia is marred by a myriad conflicts, including terrorism, ethnic conflicts, identity politics and many other that strikes the very chord of human progress and development. Terrorism has always been hanging like a 'Sword of Damocles' on the countries of South Asia, and has been impacting, and subsequently destroying the regional balance in such a way that it really is a stupendous task to fix it back. A leap forward in this direction is an imperative.

There is an intricate link between religion and extremism. The late cold war was an era of proxy wars, marked by a number of developments. Political Islam was born in the colonial period, but did not give rise to a terrorist movement until the cold war. The common ground that nurtured the "Islamic terrorism" was the late Cold War after Vietnam. Following this what really aggravated the situation was the dubious distinction made by the then US President George Bush about "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims". The central message behind this discourse was that, unless proved to be "good", every Muslim was presumed to be "bad". Muslims around the globe now had the necessary obligation to prove their credentials.[3] What

has come to haunt the developed world more directly is the lack of state capacity in poor countries. By the end of the cold war, a band of failed and weak states stretching from Caucasus, the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia was leftover. The disaster of September 11 proved that state weakness indeed constituted a huge strategic challenge. The Radical Islamist challenge combined with the "availability of weapons of mass destruction added a new security dimension to the burden of problems created by weak governance."[4]

2. Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations

The word 'terrorism' is used most often to describe revolutionary violence. That is a small victory for the champions of order, among whom the uses of terror are by no means unknown. The systematic terrorizing of whole populations is a strategy of both conventional and guerrilla war, as well as radical movements, vying for different objectives. In its modern manifestations, terror is the totalitarian form of war and politics with unpredictable consequences. What it does is that it totally shatters both war convention and politically accepted codes. It totally breaks across moral limits beyond which no further limitations seem possible. Terrorists kill and maim anybody and notwithstanding this, terrorism has been defended not only by terrorists themselves, but also by philosophical apologists writing on their behalf.[5]

Non-state actors who use violence to pursue a socio-political agenda are the modern day pestilence which must to be rein in. Because, the bellow of their destruction has penetrated the whole region. The importance of this lies in the fact that these groups have the potential to incinerate the far-off areas i.e. beyond the South Asian region. The underlying intention and the idea is not to label these actors "terrorists" because, although they often attack non-combatant targets, they do not do so exclusively; they also strike military, police, and other government assets. Moreover, they often seek to influence target audiences and achieve battle field victories. Definitions vary, but in its narrow sense, terrorism, is usually understood as violence by non-state actors, that is either directed against non-combatants, or intended to coerce or garner support among particular audiences rather than to win on the battlefield, or at times both.[6]

Within a theoretical framework of Clash of civilizations, we can argue that there is no gainsaying the fact that Islamic and Western

civilizations being incompatible to each other are destined to be at loggerheads. The end of the Cold War has intensified global conflicts.[7] Scores of Muslim-majority countries are witnessing pro-democracy, ethno-national, sectarian and separatist movements, terrorism, and insurgencies.[8] The South Asian region is not in any way oblivious to this development or the uncertain path. These are ominous signs which do not bode well for the world peace, as it has the so called spill over effect attached with it. Conflicting ideologies, identities, and interests of the Muslim and the Western worlds have prepared the ground for the several rounds of face-offs between the two old adversaries representing the Islamic and Judeo-Christian civiliza- tions. Meanwhile the Muslim world is settling its own old scores on sectarian, territorial, ideological, ethnic and class lines. Much has been anticipated and predicted vis-à-vis changing dynamics in the foreseeable future. Once the major feuds and disputes are over, once the fractured and artificial Muslim-majority countries resolve their ethno-national and sectarian issues, on both intra and state levels, Muslims are likely to come closer to each other. In this regard, Shias and Sunnis, Turks and Arabs, Afghans and Pakistanis have already started to take initiative. A much needed positive development for the regional stability.[9]

Taking the arguments to the next level, scholars like Taj Hashmi argue that the quest for politico-cultural identities and aspirations for better rights and freedom by imagined communities are important factors behind the religious conflicts and extremism. Further Hashmi says that, in the modern day conflicts (21 Century), we find Jerry Muller's theory of "Clash of Peoples" more acceptable than the one by Huntington and Fukuyama. Muller argues that, ethnic nationalism will drive global politics for generations. The peaceful regional order of modern nation-states is a product of a rather violent process of ethnic separation, and the future of political struggle is poised to remain ugly in all those areas where separation has not yet occurred.[10]

There have been a many tectonic power shifts over the last five hundred years, which have reshaped the international order politically, economically and culturally.[11] One of the basic factors for de-stabilization in the Muslim World has been the backwardness attributed to their lack of freedom and not to the European colonial rule.[12] The notion of "trade wars" is again a factor of de-stabilization in many parts of the world.[13] Again someone like Ayesha Siddiqa

attributes the de-stabilization to the powerful Military-Industrial Complex, which in turn gains dividends by keeping the region turbulent to legitimize and further strengthen their position.[14]

Transnational conflicts always have the requisite potency to transcend the sub-regional boundaries, and if not checked and contained, they might adversely affect countries beyond particular regions and sub-regions. Many extra-Islamic dimensions of crime, terror, and proxy wars are not only de-stabilising the regional stability of South Asia, but are also posing a serious threat and challenge, to the adjoining sub-regions and to the global peace as well. The regional balance of power has suffered a jolt which in turn is likely to hit the world very badly in the foreseeable future.

Rogue states and the elements in government machinery along with non-state actors can destabilize neighbouring countries. In South Asia, Islamist terror networks, drugs and arms syndicates pose the main transnational threat to countries within and beyond the region. Various global, regional and local factors contribute to the rise of Islamist extremism and drug *mafias* in South Asia.[15]

One of the basic de-stabilising factors in South Asia has been the bad governance and leaders' opportunistic and guileful use of mafias and terrorist groups to cultivate their interests. The War on Terror has further aggravated the situation. Ever since the beginning of the drug-Islamist nexus in South Asia, analysts have coined the expressions narco-Islamism and narco-jihad to denote a new type of transnational crime and insurgency. Ehsan Ahrari argues that a narco-jihad is being funded by the opium-related system of trade in Afghanistan and Pakistan, still growing unprecedented albeit mostly concentrated in Pakistan. Ahrari imputes this growth in activities to the iron triangle of warlords, corrupt government officials, and the Taliban-al Qaeda nexus.[16] The whole blame should not be levelled against Pakistani state, instead U.S.A. is to a good extent responsible for whatever is transpiring in the region. America not only supported but actively promoted military dictators and undemocratic regimes in Pakistan since 1950's and actively connived in promoting mujahedeen in the AF-PAK region.[17]

3. Terror Anatomy in South Asia

South Asia's tryst with terrorism has not been an old phenomena, instead is a recent one, as compared to the other parts of

the regions like West Asian one. In the last decade or so, it has emerged as an epicentre of terrorism, with a sinister designs to subvert the entire harmonious social fabric of the region. The present wave of terrorism in South Asia has intricate manifestations. There are a number of the so called terrorist organizations, with equally contested and guileful interests, motivations and goals. Worth mentioning here are organizations like Al-Qaeda, TTP, LeT and may others, who by umpteen means differ from each other in their extremist demeanour and also their very agenda. "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-Tayyiaba (LeT) are traditionally oriented towards committing violence, in the name of Kashmir."[18]

Terrorism has plagued the entire South Asian region in such a way that it is passing through a very turbulent period of its history. Even though the United States has managed to quell many a terror activities in its own yard, South Asian countries have not been so lucky in this regard, and the level of intensification has been unprecedented in some cases. However, despite all this there have been some positive developments in various fields where the cooperation can lead to regional balance and stability in order to overcome the problems.

Terror groups in South Asia can be placed under three categories :

1. Terrorism arising out religious fundamentalism

2. Left-Wing extremism

3. Terror activities arising out of desire for Secessionism

Terrorism has impacted the domestic political structures in South Asian countries in a rather horrendous manner by encouraging militarism, chauvinism and a distinct tilt towards Right-wing extremism. Terrorism imposes both direct and indirect costs on the economies of those countries on which terror activities are perpetrated. Its direct costs include the destruction of infra-structure, factories, agricultural produce and a severe halt in economic activities. Its indirect costs are myriad and arise out of general loss of confidence vis-à-vis economy due to which the economy is unable to attract foreign investment (FDI) and faces brain drain, enhanced

military expenditure, high transaction costs and various other economic distortions. This is the story of most South Asian countries. Today, Pakistan and Afghanistan are in the grip of terror unleashed by Islamist radical groups including the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and various other non-state actors. For instance, in case of Afghanistan hardly any industrial development is visible because the country has been embroiled in conflict for decades, impacting the superstructure of its society. Even Pakistan, which was much better off comparison to Afghanistan, is facing de-industrialization in certain pockets hence rendering its economic and other developments.[19]

All the South Asian countries are plagued by the problems of terrorism in one form or the other. In case of Sri Lanka, Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) is poised against the state apparatus, and battling for the political space and a separate Tamil Eelam government. However, the state has successfully managed to eliminate the LTTE. Despite every effort it remains to be seen, how the situation is managed by the Sri Lankan government from here on, so that no such group crops out in foreseeable future. The situation in Nepal is also very bleak and interestingly poised. In Nepal, the Maoism is on its peak and Maoists have been waging war against the monarchy. Now that the monarchy has been overthrown, and the new Constitution has been drafted, still terror activities are very much alive in Nepal. The peace prospectus of Nepali state is certainly a long drawn battle. Maldives has seen a rising phenomenon of Islamic extremism. Small sized countries like Bhutan had successfully destroyed the camps of the ULFA and few other Indian North-eastern terror organizations in December 2003 but several reports now suggest that these groups have the potential and in fact are trying very hard to regroup in Bhutanese territory. Bhutan also faces a threat from the Maoist activities. India, geographically being the largest country in South Asia, also faces major challenge of terrorism. In fact, the India has suffered the most among all south Asian countries. The Indian state has fought its battle against terrorism alone and it has been successful to a good extent. But still a lot needs to be done in order to confront and weed out this menace. In Bangladesh the government is acting against the Islamist radicals but groups like JMB and Huji still remain active. The government has however done well to capture and defeat many of them. Bangladesh also faces the problem of left-wing extremism in certain pockets but their influence seems to have been reduced in recent times as per various official and non-official data.[20]

4.   Counter-Terror Strategy

Developing a coherent counter-terror strategy is the imperative, because terrorism ebbs and flows. Today the greatest challenge before the world is to prevent the acquisition of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, from falling into the wrong hands. Every country in the South Asian region needs to walk a tight rope instead of launching off the cuff policies and ideals. It is therefore, high time that the South Asian community develop newer approaches to counter the threat of terrorism. What is required is a comprehensive grand strategy on the part of state apparatus that emphasises the principles of secular tolerance and moderation in order to win hearts and minds, while limiting the use of force or coercion to occasions where it is absolutely necessary. In other words the approach of the state should be maximum restraint. Implementing such a strategy will require a more holistic and coordinated approach to build up counter-terrorism capacities and partnerships across South Asia and with other stakeholders.[21]

Terrorism is not just a military problem but also a socio-political and economic problem. So the need for a regional strategy and cooperation is absolutely imperative. The idea therefore, should not be only to concentrate on stopping violence, but also to question, condemn and debunk all the irrational and preposterous ideologies that severely undermine and compromise the growth and development of healthy democratic political systems and effective governance. Various elements of both hard power as well as soft power must be used, to gain dividends. The gravitas and an effective counterterrorism strategy for the region should also integrate cross-cutting issues at various levels of analysis which may include linkages with trans-national organised crime, illicit drugs, money laundering, illegal arms trafficking, and the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological, and other potentially deadly weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. A unified action by all the states is needed in this direction.[22]

5.   Averting the storm of Terrorism

In order to resolve/avert a conflict in a rather efficacious manner, it is necessary to identify the stakeholders first, and the basics of conflict resolution need to be studied carefully. This may bring much fruition, which in turn might help in resolving conflicts.

However, Identification and involvement of all stakeholders is a key issue and a pertinent issue in conflict resolution.[23]

Many political and strategic analysts argue that, the road to peace in South Asia runs through Afghanistan. The end game in Afghanistan requires the active support of both Central and South Asian neighbours.[24] What is fascinating to note is that, most of the South Asian states are becoming conscious about the mutual cooperation, in confronting the challenges of terrorism. The identities cutting across ethnic lines and the contagious borders have made the countries of the region realize about the spill over effect of terror and violence. Bilateral cooperation should triumph. No single country can contain or avert the menace of terrorism without the active support of its both immediate and far-off neighbours. What is lacking in the region is the understanding and the mutual trust. Since, nothing emanates from within the region, the ideal situation would need honest brokers to overcome the menace of terrorism. The cobweb of politics in the entire region has taken such an intricate shape that, it is not guaranteed that involving global powers like USA and China would provide fruition. Both the global powers if engaged to resolve mutual differences, will only strive for their vested interests. China has problems not only with India but the US as well. Similarly, US will never trust Pakistan in the long run. Pakistan is not prepared to either accept or acquiesce to the Indian hegemony. Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are also suspicious of both US and Indian designs. South Asia needs definitive peaceful resolutions of transnational conflicts and the proxy wars in the region. Secular and tolerant aspect of religion may play an important role in this matter.

References

1. Jalal, A., *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2009.
2. Ganguly, S., *Security Issues in South Asia*, Colorado : Westview Press inc., 2000.
3. Mamdani, M., **Good Muslim, Bad Muslim**, Unisa Press, 2004.
4. Fukuyama, F., *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, London : Profile Books, 2017.
5. Walzer, M., *Just and Unjust Wars*, New York : Basic Books, 1991, 158, 210.
6. Kapur, S. P. & Ganguly, S., "The jihad paradox: Pakistan and Islamist militancy in South Asia", *International Security*, 37(1), 2012, 111-141.

7. Huntington, S. P., "The clash of civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, 22-49.

8. Hashmi, T., *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan*, New Delhi : Sage Publications India, 2014.

9. Ibid.

10. Muller, J. Z., "Us and them: The enduring power of ethnic nationalism", *Foreign Affairs*, 2008, 18-35.

11. Zakaria, F., *The post-American World*, New York : W. W. Norton & Company, 2008, 4.

12. Lewis, B., *What went wrong?: Western impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford, England : Oxford University Press, 2002.

13. Chomsky, N., *On power and ideology: The Managua Lectures*, Chicago, Illinois, United States : Haymarket Books, 2015.

14. Siddiqua, A., *Military Inc. : Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, Gurugram : Penguin Random House India, 2007.

15. Hashmi, T., *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan*, New Delhi : SAGE Publications India, 2014.

16. Ahrari, E., *The Dynamics of "Narco-Jihad" in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region*, The National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report, 20, 2009, 43-47.

17. Hashmi, T., *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan*, New Delhi : SAGE Publications India, 2014.

18. Ahmad, I., *Terrorism in South Asia*, London : Institute of South Asia, 2011.

19. Kumar, A. (ed.), *The Terror Challenge in South Asia and Prospect of Regional Cooperation*, New Delhi : Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Pentagon Security and International, 2012.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. ibid.

23. Qureshi, M. N., "Narco-Trade and Conflict Resolution: A Case-Study of Afghanistan" (available at : ndu.edu.pk › issra › issra-paper › 07-Narco-Trade-Mehvish).

24. Rashid, A., *Pakistan on the brink : The future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*, UK : Penguin Books, 2013.   ★