Terrorism, Religious Radicalism and Violence Perspectives from India

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Terrorism in India has hitherto been understood either as a constituent of the country's multiple conflicts – nationalist, separatist and ideological – or as part of state patronage through proxy wars. The November 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai underscores its regional nature, over and above the already thriving transnational operational linkages.

Although India suffers from acts of violence by right-wing forces, this essay restricts its assessment to transnational Islamist terrorism, mainly because of its regional linkages as opposed to the domestic roots of the former.

II
CHANGING NATURE TERRORISM IN INDIA

The following trends assume importance in understanding the nature of Islamist terrorism in India.

A Global Agenda by Islamist Radical Groups?

Unlike earlier, the Mumbai attacks indicate the emergence of India as a target of transnational terrorism. Going beyond the objective of liberatiing Kashmir or seeking revenge for Gujarat, the attacks sought to "cripple India's economic growth, destroy national confidence in its political system, attack its open society and provoke destabilizing communal rivalries", all of which are seen as a hindrance to establishing an Islamic Caliphate (Tellis 2008). At the centre of this phenomenon are two Islamist militant groups – the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the HUJI-B, both of which are part of the International Islamic Front (IIF) of which al Qaeda is a founding member, and are committed to the cause of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.

Expanding Network of LeT and HUJI-B

Post-Mumbai attacks and the release of two of its jailed leaders, the LeT is as much a threat as the Taliban or any other group of the al Qaeda network. This concern, is based on doubts regarding the ability of Pakistan army and ISI to crack down on their own creation. There are also doubts regarding a split within the LeT and its disintegration into splinter groups, not necessarily under the control of the Pakistan army. This further implies that the group has followed a trajectory not expected even by the Pakistan army. Given this possibility, recent reports revealing the group's operations and bases in India, its recruitment strategy, and financial network are of grave concern.

The recent arrest of Mohammad Omar Madni, a close associate of Saeed, revealed plans of the LeT to establish bases in the Konkan region and Malabar coastal area of Kerala, parts of Jharkhand, and in the jungles along the Indo-Nepal border, to facilitate the transfer of funds (Hindu 6 June 2009). Nepal, in particular, is emerging as an important base for the LeT to carry out its operations in India, as revealed by Madni (Indian Express 11 June 2009). In terms of its recruitment strategy, the LeT is looking to those working in fireworks factories who can be trained to assemble improvised explosive devices, apart from computer literates and graduates from the metropolises (Hindu 6 June 2009). While LeT's Gulf connections are well-established, investigations into the 2008 Mumbai attacks have revealed a similar pattern, involving Gulf-based financers (Roul 2009).

Since joining the IIF in 1998, HUJI-B has sought to expand its linkages with separatist groups like ULFA in Assam and other Islamist terrorist groups like JeM and LeT to facilitate a "mutual swap of operatives for operations, mutual use of bases and safe houses, and logistical networking for increasing operational

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developing an alternative framework for peace and security in the region

capability and reach" (Bhaumik 2009). Although state patronage, both from Pakistan and Bangladesh, is believed to have played a critical role in the operations of HUJI-B in India, the large pool of Bangladeshi migrants in parts of Assam and other states, has also benefited the outfit enormously.

Sectarian and Other Radical Transnational Islamists

Given the congruence between the goals of various Islamist groups, another significant development taking place in the region is a rapprochement between the Islamist sectarian groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah-i-Sahaba (SSP) and transnational Islamic terrorist groups like the Jaish-i-Mohammad, Lashkar-i-Taiba, and al Qaeda. Although this relationship dates back to the Afghan war, Pakistan's participation in the ongoing war on terrorism, the resultant change in the geo-politics of the region, and the subsequent ban on these groups, have strengthened the links more than ever (Grare 2009). Post-9/11, LeJ provided much of the logistical support and personnel to the al Qaeda and Taliban present in Pakistan. Committed to the cause of establishing an Islamic Caliphate, groups such as the SSP and LeJ are well-known for perpetrating terrorist attacks against the shia community in Pakistan.

Their growing network is evident from the construction of a Lal Masjid-like madrassa by the banned group JeM in Bahawalpur (Newsline 2008). Consequently, with sectarian groups blending into the broader internationalist jihadi cause, the shia-sunni conflict has lost much of its relevance (Grare 2009). Many have since warned that the danger of an Islamist takeover of Pakistan by sectarian groups is as strong as by the Taliban (Harrison 2009).

Such a development is likely to pave way for the emergence of more radical extremists. With the blurring of lines between the sectarian and transnational Islamist groups and the expanding base of operations across the state of Punjab in Pakistan, India faces the imminent threat of a spill-over. The recent incident of a rocket explosion in a paddy field in Dhundi village, close to the Wagah border, reportedly fired by the Taliban against the Pakistan rangers' post in Lahore sector, but which overshot its target, is illustrative of the dangers of a war inching closer to our borders (Telegraph 6 July 2009).

Rise of Urban Homegrown Terrorism

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Linked to the above developments, is the rise of a group of individuals in India willing to take up violence in the name of religion. While the emergence of the first such group of homegrown terrorists dates back to 1993 (John 2008), this phenomenon has gained considerable momentum in the past few years with the emergence of the 'Indian Mujahideen (IM),' a group that first claimed responsibility for the court blasts in UP in November 2007. Committed to the cause of spreading Islam in India, the group has since claimed responsibility for a series of bomb blasts that occurred in quick succession in 2008: Jaipur (May), Bangalore (July), Ahemdabad (July), and New Delhi (September).

Notwithstanding reports alleging links between the IM, LeT, Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), and even Pakistan's ISI, the rise of the group throws significant light on the pattern of radicalization in India. Most of the alleged members of the group, arrested or charged by the Maharashtra police, belong to Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh and are young, educated, employed men, adept at exploiting the latest technology. This is in sharp contrast to the predominant phenomenon of madrassa-educated and bred terrorists in the region..

Technical Capabilities and Resources

In sync with the development of transnational terrorism, the attacks in India underscore the accretion of terrorist resources in terms of access to higher technology, equipment, communications, and cyber space. The Internet, in particular, is emerging as a powerful tool used by terrorists for multiple purposes, including propaganda and publicity, networking, fundraising, recruitment and mobilization, and planning and coordination (Weimann 2004). With these developments, transnational organizations such as the al Qaeda, reflect newer organizational patterns, guided by a broad set of guidelines rather than a command hierarchy.

II
POLICY CHALLENGES TO COUNTER TERRORISM

Fragile political systems and nascent democracies have generated ideal conditions for the sponsorship of insurgencies, resulting in institutionalizing this phenomenon. The transnational nature of terrorism, however, is significantly transforming the challenge of terrorism in India. The convergence of different Islamist groups in pursuit of a global agenda, thriving transnational financial and commercial networks, access to latest communication technology coupled with weak institutional capacities, socioeconomic marginalization and widespread corruption, reflect the complexity of the challenges, both regional and domestic, which confront India in its fight against terrorism.

Domestic Challenges

Recent attacks in India have underscored the multiple challenges in countering terrorism – from a weak and poorly-trained police force, weak intelligence-gathering, target hardening (security

cover of public places), gaps in coastal security, poor-response time and emergency services, to poor information management and communications. Post the attacks, the government has initiated several institutional and administrative reforms, including the creation of a Coastal Command to secure the 4,650 miles of shoreline, establishment of 20 counter-terror schools and standing regional commando units, creation of a national agency to investigate suspected terror activity, expansion of police forces, setting up of specialized anti-terrorism squads across states, establishment of four new National Security Guards (trained in counterterrorism and counter-hijack operations) centers in main metropolitan cities, and strengthening of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The effectiveness of many of these measures, however, hinges upon two critical factors: inter-agency, inter-state and center-state coordination, and the level of civic engagement and public confidence that the personnel are able to garner.

A less emphasized, but equally formidable challenge in countering homegrown terrorism is identifying the 'radical' from among the law-abiding majority. As noted above, a majority of those taking to Islamist terrorism in India belong to the educated and employed section of society. Their recourse to terrorism is the result of a sense of alienation caused by political, social and economic discrimination, rather than an aspiration for religious salvation..

Regional Challenges

The cross-border linkages of transnational terrorism warrant an effective regional response to the threat. The biggest challenge in this regard is securing India's borders at a time when the forces of globalization are reducing the significance of national borders. While India is keen to push for cross-border trade to strengthen economic linkages, it concomitantly faces the danger of infiltration by inimical forces as also a large number of migrants who face the danger of becoming a parish for radicalization. Coastal security is another area of concern that has emerged post-Mumbai attacks. The guarding of India's 7,516km-long coastline, along nine states, is a formidable task, demanding an appraisal of the capacity of the Coast Guard, the primary agency responsible for guarding the coastline.

The predominant challenge however, remains the continuing mutual distrust and suspicion; the Mumbai investigations, for instance, have been affected by the stalemate between India and Pakistan over 'credible evidence' and 'effective cooperation in investigations'. This stems, in part, from the failure to recognize the emergence of transnational terrorism that is targeting both India and Pakistan..

Regional efforts and arrangements such as SAARC have also been rendered ineffective due to political mistrust. This situation, however, could well be changing, given the increasing victimization of most South Asian countries (except Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka, to some extent) by transnational terrorism. Supporting a regional mechanism to facilitate technical cooperation in counterinsurgency,

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including training of practitioners and other capacity-building measures, will go a long way in undermining political mistrust and securing India's national interests.

III
RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are some recommendations, keeping in mind the measures already undertaken by the Ministry of Home Affairs to augment India's internal security infrastructure.

Immediate Measures - Domestic

- To combat financing of terrorism, create a specialized cell, including officers with expertise on financial investigations, to augment the power of the investigative agencies engaged in counterterrorism.

- Given the increasing use of the Internet by terrorists, create web-based organizations to monitor terrorists websites, increased surveillance of internet cafes, use of technology that can identify the location of a computer and filter access to particular Internet content according to the national origin of the computer (Geolocation software) and internet content policy legislations that allow the government to regulate content on the internet, need to be explored and debated in India (Conway 2007).

- Focus on Border Area Development Programmes that aim to promote the socio-economic development of communities living close to India's borders to reduce their vulnerability to being use by inimical forces.

- Besides increasing security cover in public places, train staff in public places in rendering first aid, evacuation techniques, and relief operations are equally important (Kanwal and Manoharan 2009) and Improve India's emergency and municipal services such as fire brigades.

Long Term Measures - Domestic

- Engage with Islamic theologians to evolve a code of conduct that will delegitimize activities of terrorists and their radical supporters (Doval 2008)

- Strengthen police-community relations to increase the resilience of communities to extremism.

Immediate Measures - Bilateral

- Build a common data bank on terrorist outfits and their networks, similar to the Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk created in Colombo.

- Establish several Working Groups on Counterterrorism, along the lines of the working groups created during the course of the peace process, where each can focus on different aspects of counterterrorism cooperation ranging from terrorist financing, sharing of information/ actionable intelligence, to the training of counterterrorism practitioners from either side, among others.

Long Term Measures - Bilateral

- Evolve a common counter-terror framework to combating terrorism. .

- Given the political obstacles impeding SAARC's work, establish a regional, technically-focused counterterrorism mechanism such as a regional law-enforcement training center that can provide training for a range of counterterrorism practitioners in collaboration with other countries; or a mechanism similar to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's Capacity-Building Programme Against Terrorism (ICPAT) in Africa that focuses on capacity-and-confidence building in the region, need to be explored (International Peace Institute, 2009).

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