

# **SOUTH ASIAN RESPONSE TO THE WAR ON TERROR**

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## **Abstract**

Five years after the U.S. led war on terror, it is time to analyze the response of South Asian countries to the efforts of international coalition to deal with the menace of terrorism. Since September 11, 2001 when terrorism *per se* got substantial recognition amidst the U.S. led drive against *Al-Qaeda*, the issue of terrorism in South Asia was viewed differently. Although, almost all the countries of South Asia had suffered enormously from the lethal implications of terrorism prior to the events of September 11, 2001, it was primarily Indo-Pak divergent perceptions on terrorism, which indicated different strategies pursued by New Delhi and Islamabad to deal with the issue of terrorism.

While terrorism in South Asia has a political, economic and religious dimensions and causes, it was primarily seen in two perspectives: first, American led war on terror particularly against the non-state actors like *Al-Qaeda* resulting into its attack on Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, the intensification of Indo-Pak cold war following the terrorist attacks over the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001 and the vicious cycle of charges and counter-charges of cross-border terrorism and state terrorism by both sides against each other. Other South Asian countries, like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka also faced the menace of terrorism either in the form of ethnic turmoil, political or religious schism.

A major implication of war on terror in South Asia has been severe curbs on various ethnic and religious movements who were believed to have links with foreign terrorist organizations. Therefore, the Tamil tigers and various splinter Tamil groups in Sri Lanka, the Maoist movement in Nepal, the Kashmiri freedom movements in the Indian controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir and various extremist religious parties and groups in Bangladesh and in Pakistan were perceived to have links with a network of international terrorism and in cases were dubbed as terrorists by the governments of these countries. As far as the response of South Asian countries on the U.S. led war on terror is concerned, four things should be taken into account. First, the diversified nature of response because of bilateral conflicts, particularly between India and Pakistan. Second, the non-implementation of SAARC convention on terrorism by the member countries. Third, the desperation of South Asian countries to get American/Western patronage on the issue of terrorism for monetary purposes. That instead of taking practical steps to eradicate causes which cause terrorism, in most cases, the South Asian regimes wanted to oblige the United States and its highly controversial war on terror. Fourth, using the threat of terrorism as a pretext to curb fundamental freedom and human rights of their citizens also proved a superficial and impractical response of South Asian states for dealing with the issue of terrorism.

This paper attempts to examine the South Asian response to war on terror by responding to following questions:-

1. *How the issue of terrorism has impacted on the regional strategic, political and security environment of South Asia?*
2. *Why the response of South Asia has been divided to deal with the issue of terrorism and how a united regional stance could be pursued in order to effectively cope with the challenge of terrorism in South Asia?*
3. *Why the SAARC's convention on terrorism has not been implemented?*
4. *How the South Asian countries can effectively deal with the menace of terrorism and what are the impediments in this regard?*

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## **1. Introduction**

Terrorism is not a post-September 11, 2001 phenomenon in South Asia but it has been given a new perspective and dimension by the state and non-state actors of this region. For the state actors, the U.S led war on terror provided them with an opportunity to seek and secure their political and economic interests while for the non-state terrorist actors, hue and cry over terrorism enabled them to augment a sense of insecurity among people for accomplishing their vested interests. Yet, terrorism is the most misunderstood and unclear term regardless of efforts made on the part of different sources to come up with a unified and acceptable definition of terrorism.

While, there exists definitional problems of terrorism, there also exists a general consensus that it is primarily a concept, which needs to be rationally examined and understood. If targeting non-combatants is considered as an act of terrorism, creating fear, panic and a sense of insecurity in society is no doubt a major objective of terrorists. According to the *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, terrorism is, "the use or threatened use of violence on a systematic basis to achieve political objectives."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, no serious effort has been made by the so-called coalition against terrorism to establish a mechanism so as to understand the causes of terrorism and providing plausible solutions to issues, which results into a transformation of some people and groups from living a peaceful to a violent way of life.

Five years after the U.S. led war on terror, it is time to analyze the response of South Asian countries to the efforts of international coalition to deal with the menace of terrorism. Since September 11, 2001 when terrorism *per se* got substantial recognition amidst the U.S. led drive against *Al-Qaeda*, the issue of terrorism in South Asia was viewed differently. Therefore, it was argued that,

South Asia emerged as the epic center of the war against terrorism immediately afterwards, with the involvement of the American and coalition forces against *Al-Qaeda* in Afghanistan. The development brought into focus not only the specter posed by the threat of global terrorism, but also the dangers<sup>2</sup> which terrorism poses within and among the countries of the region.<sup>2</sup>

Although, almost all the countries of South Asia had suffered enormously from the lethal implications of terrorism prior to the events of September 11, 2001, it was primarily Indo-Pak divergent perceptions on terrorism, which indicated different strategies pursued by New Delhi and Islamabad to deal with the issue of terrorism without getting proper results. In the composite dialogue which has been going on between India and Pakistan since 2004, the issue of terrorism is discussed, yet the two sides are far from reaching a concrete understanding on how to deal with that issue. Each side is still a victim of deep-rooted insecurity, mistrust and suspicion.

While terrorism in South Asia has political, economic and religious dimensions and causes, it was primarily seen in two perspectives: first, American led war on terror particularly against the non-state actors like *Al-Qaeda* resulting into its attack on Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, the intensification of Indo-Pak cold war following the terrorist attacks over the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001 and the vicious cycle of charges and counter-charges of cross-border terrorism and state terrorism by both sides against each other. Other South Asian countries, like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka also faced the menace of terrorism before September 11, either in the form of ethnic turmoil, political or religious schism. In all the South Asian countries, barring Maldives, the issue of terrorism got mixed up with inter and intra-state conflicts and some of the local issues which triggered violence and attacks on innocent people.

A major implication of war on terror in South Asia has been severe curbs on various ethnic and religious movements who were believed to have links with foreign or transnational terrorist organizations. Therefore, the Tamil tigers and various splinter Tamil groups in Sri Lanka, the Maoist movement in Nepal, the Kashmiri freedom movements in the Indian controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir and various extremist religious parties and groups in Bangladesh and in Pakistan were perceived to have links with a network of international terrorism and in some cases were dubbed as terrorists by the governments of these countries. As far as the response of South Asian countries on the U.S. led war on terror is concerned, four things should be taken into account. First, the diversified nature of response because of bilateral conflicts, particularly between India and Pakistan. Second, the non-implementation of SAARC convention on terrorism by the member countries. Third, the desperation of South Asian countries to get American/Western patronage on the issue of terrorism for monetary, political and security purposes. That instead of taking practical steps to eradicate causes which promote terrorism, in most cases, the South Asian regimes wanted to oblige the United States and its highly controversial war on terror. Fourth, using the threat of terrorism as a pretext to curb fundamental freedom and human rights of their citizens also proved a superficial and impractical response of South Asian states for dealing with the issue of terrorism. This practice was followed in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and in the name of counter terrorism and national security curbs on fundamental freedom were imposed by the state.

This paper attempts to examine the South Asian response to war on terror by responding to the following questions:-

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2. *Why the response of South Asia has been divided to deal with the issue of terrorism and how a united regional stance could be pursued in order to effectively cope with the challenge of terrorism in South Asia?*
3. *How the South Asian countries can prudently deal with the menace of terrorism and what are the impediments in this regard?*

## **2. Strategic, Political and Security Dimensions**

As terrorism has multi-dimensional facets, in South Asia, one can observe strategic, political and security implications of this phenomenon in this crisis and conflict ridden region.

Strategically and politically, implications of 9/11 on South Asia have made things difficult for reduction in defense expenditure and relaxation in travel, trade and communication restrictions among the regional countries. In the name of counter terrorism, policies aiming to augment military expenditures and putting a check on people to people interaction continue to be practiced by the South Asian countries, particularly by India and Pakistan. As a result, political and security environment of South Asia is also made a hostage to the strange logic presented under the war on terror. When terrorists target the “Samjotha Express” or when there is a suicide attack in Pakistan, instead of carrying out detailed investigation and then coming up with an evidence against those responsible for carrying out acts of terrorism, Islamabad and New Delhi lose no opportunity in blaming each other resulting into the escalation of tension and derailing of the peace process.

Four important factors should be taken into account while analyzing the strategic, political and security dimensions of terrorism in South Asia. First, large-scale poverty, under-development and illiteracy result into the emergence of several groups who are striving for political and economic empowerment but are denied their adequate role in governance by those who wield enormous power. The marginalization of such sections of society promote intolerance, extremism, militancy and radicalism in society resulting into the deepening of violence and a general sense of insecurity. Since, state is unable to provide equal economic opportunities to people; is not able to reduce ethnic, communal and sectarian prejudices and wants to maintain status quo in the power configuration, the outcome is the radical transformation of society in many South Asian countries. The rise of intolerance *vis-à-vis* religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka led to the acts of violence and terrorism causing instability and insecurity in these countries. State actors, who should have tried to follow a prudent approach on issues which cause sense of deprivation and resentment among the socially deprived groups tried to quell their assertions by military means and under the pretext of national security. Second, the regimes of South Asia, instead of addressing the causes of terrorism, blamed each other of promoting and sponsoring various terrorist groups. This type of a situation largely exists in the context of Indo-Pak and Pak-Afghan blame game as all the three countries, disregard the issues which encourage groups restoring to terrorist methods for accomplishing their objectives. If in case of India and Pakistan, the reasons of militancy and terrorism are primarily internal but in Afghanistan it is mostly the resistance movement launched by a section of Pashtun community.

Third, the role of state and society in South Asia is not supportive to prudently deal with the menace of terrorism. State actors, particularly, their intelligence agencies are least mindful to the fact that without taking different segments of civil society into confidence they cannot effectively deal with the challenge of terrorism. Insecurity of state is also responsible for not understanding the main dynamics of terrorism. What has happened in the post-9/11 scenario in South Asia is curbs on democratic freedom thus giving space to extremist forces. Societal forces in South Asia also failed to play their assertive role in giving a proper direction as far as the issue of terrorism is concerned. One can also see the emergence of extremist elements at the societal level in almost all the South Asia countries. Jihadi groups in Pakistan<sup>3</sup>, Hindu extremist parties in India, religious extremist groups in Bangladesh and ethnic extremist groups in Sri Lanka also represent civil societies of their respective countries. Paradoxically, the division of civil societies in South Asia on moderate and extremist lines weakened drive against violence and terrorism in the region.

Fourth, the state actors in South Asia followed a traditional approach to respond to the challenge of terrorism in the region. Without realizing the fact that the issue of terrorism should be handled without pursuing a policy of charges and counter-charges, India and Pakistan continued with the blame game. As a result, some of the acts of terrorism, which were primarily the outcome of societal contradictions and the failure of state to provide social justice, democracy, good governance and the rule of law were given a totally wrong picture. State actors also followed a policy of covering up other acts of terrorism, which had caused enormous physical losses because of their incompetence to track down those responsible for playing with the lives of innocent people. For instance, without finding any substantial evidence of those responsible for Mumbai and New Delhi blasts, some of the Indian official authorities pointed out their fingers at Pakistan. Similarly, the terrorist attack at the Samjhota express also provided another opportunity to New Delhi to implicate some of the Pakistan based banned terrorist groups responsible for conducting that act. Likewise, authorities in Pakistan on many occasions put charges on their eastern neighbor for their involvement in terrorist acts. When there were suicide attacks in various religious gatherings in Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore and other cities of Pakistan, the hand of the Indian intelligence agency was found. The current acts of sabotage in Balochistan and the past activities by the nationalist groups and parties in Sindh were alleged to have got support from New Delhi. For a long period of time, Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) now transformed as the Muthaida Quami Movement was suspected to have links with the Indian intelligence agency RAW. Same was the case with activist and leaders of Sindhi Nationalist party, Jiya Sindh, who were believed to have external connections.

There may be some truth in such allegations, but wisdom demands that before putting public charges against each other on sponsoring terrorism, India and Pakistan must try to settle such matters diplomatically instead of externalizing things. Perhaps, there are rouge elements in the security establishments of India and Pakistan who are responsible for perpetuating mistrust and ill will between the two countries by providing false information to their governments so as to add value to their tasks. Insecurity of state actors also provide a lot of space to elements in the two countries who do not want normalization and stability in Indo-Pak relations and use terrorism as a pretext in this regard. Each time there is a high profile meeting

between Indian and Pakistani officials, they agree to deal with the issue of terrorism professionally but in practice, when some terrorist act takes place in their countries, they blame each other without first finding out the evidence. Interestingly, before 2004, whenever, there was a high profile visit of American or European official to India, some act of terrorism used to take place in the Indian controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir. When President Clinton visited India in March 2000, dozens of Hindu pilgrims were ambushed in the Valley and the blame was put on Pakistan and the Muslim Kashmiri liberation groups. Such tactics on the part of India were tantamount to manipulating the issue of terrorism before the outside world. Therefore, unless, the state actors in South Asia, change their approach as far as finding those responsible for terrorism is concerned, the blame game against each other will continue. Finally, the extra-regional environment is also responsible for determining strategic, security and political implications of terrorism in South Asia. The U.S. led war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq and the growing nexus between international drug mafia and regional terrorist network is also responsible for augmenting chaos, insecurity and instability in South Asia. How the global terrorist network has its coordination with the regional terrorist groups needs to be examined. Then, there is also the phenomenon of 'underworld' and its linkage with ethnic and religious terrorist groups. Is it not possible for the underworld in South Asia to carry out acts of kidnappings, murders and violence and put the blame of such happenings on various terrorist groups so as to absolve themselves from the responsibility of such acts?

Such enormous challenges, which the South Asian countries faced because of the growth of terrorist acts, require an effective response not only by the state actors but also by the SAARC. The 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit, held in New Delhi also took notice of the issue of terrorism. In earlier SAARC summits also, the issue of terrorism was discussed and the member countries had expressed their readiness to coordinate their efforts to track down terrorists; their mode of operations and sources of funding. In the SAARC declaration, which was issued after the conclusion of 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit, the member states stated that, "terrorism was a threat to peace and security in the region."<sup>4</sup> SAARC members also condemned the targeted killing of civilians and terrorist violence, in all its forms and manifestations, wherever and against whomsoever committed. But condemning terrorist violence may be one thing and not taking collective measures to effectively deal with the threat of terrorism cannot be another thing because in any case, there must not be a bridge in theory and practice of SAARC member states as far as combating terrorism is concerned. In this scenario, there was no major breakthrough in the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit as far as the issue of terrorism is concerned.<sup>5</sup>

In its essence, terrorism is not just the issue of states of South Asia, it is equally significant for the society because at the end of the day, it is the people who suffer from the disastrous implications of terrorism. If a handful of minority in South Asia is a beneficiary of terrorism and violence, the vast majority has to pay a heavy price in terms of material and physical casualties; chaos, disorder and loss of freedom. Elites' perception on terrorism may not go beyond law and order problem or their belief that terrorism was the task of handful of extremist elements, but they do not understand the sufferings of people as they have to give their lives in suicide attacks and bomb blasts.

Unless the dignity of human life is properly understood in South Asia and cases where acts of violence and terrorism are common are not covered up, the issue of terrorism in South Asia would remain with lethal ramifications. Despite terrorist happenings resulting into the killing of scores of people, no proper judicial enquiry takes place and those responsible for causing physical and material damages are able to get away.

### **3. Lack of Unified Response**

Why the South Asian countries are unable to give a collective response to the menace of terrorism and how their failure of shared handling of that issue has resulted into the permeation of extremism, radicalism and terrorism at the grassroots' level? Are there institutional loopholes, which give space to terrorist elements in South Asia or there is sheer incompetence on the part of agencies who are supposed to deal with terrorist individuals and groups?

Three important reasons could be figured out for the absence of a united South Asian response as far as the issue of terrorism is concerned. First, the lack of proper research done in the field of terrorism in South Asia. Viewed in a parochial manner, terrorism is merely understood in terms of ethnic and religious extremism; law and order problem or an outcome of foreign support to various groups working against state and national interests. Terrorism in South Asia is also perceived as the act of some misguided people and miscreants who should be dealt with an iron hand. The lack of proper knowledge to understand the causes of terrorism; its different dimensions and implications result into faulty response on the part of state and society for dealing with the issue of terrorism. Second, the failure of state actors to deal with the issue of terrorism in a political manner is also responsible for the growth of various terrorist groups. The rise of Tamil tigers in Sri Lanka, Chakma insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Maoists in Nepal, autonomous movement in the Madhesi region of Nepal, secessionist and autonomous movements in India and in Pakistan and anti-U.S. insurgency in Afghanistan are political issues but because of their mishandling by the state actors of South Asia, these issues and movements have been transformed as violent and terrorist. Splinter terrorist groups from the mainstream political parties emerged because of either the absence of a political process or the quelling of ethnic or religious political parties by the state.

Third, the lack of coordination among the intelligence and security agencies of South Asian countries to share information about terrorist groups also led to the marginalization of real issues which cause terrorism at various levels. So, as long as the South Asian countries fail to give a coherent, unified and matching response to the challenge of terrorism, this issue will continue to cause insecurity, chaos, fear and disorder in the region. The real sufferers of negligence, negative politics and indifference to the vital issue of terrorism are the people of South Asia. It is time that under the framework of SAARC a mechanism to professionally deal with the issue of terrorism is established and non-governmental organizations, who have a stake in peace and stability of South Asia, are also involved in this regard.

As far as adopting a unified regional stance to combat terrorism is concerned, it is the need of the hour. Even before September 11, 2001, most of the South Asian countries faced the menace of terrorism in the form of bomb blasts, target killings, suicide attacks but the absence of a regional mechanism to deal with that issue gave a lot of space to terrorists. The nexus between underworld and various terrorist groups and organizations of South Asia is a vivid example of how systematic and organized such elements are in order to continue with their drive to create panic, fear and disorder in society. The mechanism to render a regional response on terrorism must include following measures:-

1. There is a need to identify issues, which trigger extremism, militarism and terrorism in South Asia. Already a lot of discussion has been done to understand the reasons and dynamics of violence and terrorism in South Asia, but what is required is a comprehensive study to be undertaken by the research centers or think tanks of South Asia. One should also look into the possibility of conducting joint research studies among South Asian scholars, academicians and journalists on understanding different dimensions of terrorism and coming out with solutions. Sharing their findings with the policy-makers of South Asia will also help effectively deal with the menace of terrorism. One can also think of establishing 'terrorism reduction centers' in all the eight SAARC countries with a major purpose of establishing 'databases' and conducting policy oriented studies to weed out terrorism from the region.
2. Non-violence should be made a part of syllabi in the South Asian educational institutions so that at the grassroots' level, proper awareness could be created for tolerance, enlightenment and peace. There is also a need to discourage hate, intolerance and biases in the minds of students and to make sure that positive images of life are taught. In the United States after the events of September 11, 2001, terrorism as a subject gained wide significance with powerful impact on the higher education in that country. For instance, "there were concerns on terrorism and related subjects before 9/11 too; however, after the attack they grew so popular that there was a need to teach the same courses as much as three times in one year to respond to demand."<sup>6</sup> As terrorism has inflicted serious damage to the social fabric of South Asia, it is necessary that violence and terrorism is established as a separate field of study in different universities and research centers of the region. Most important, instead of embarking on research which aims to discredit each other, South Asian scholars should try to objectively and rationally deal with the issue of terrorism and a practicable mechanism to eliminate the causes which promote the inadvertent use of force against non-combatants.
3. South Asian resolve to combat terrorism must be de-linked from the U.S. war on terrorism because the real challenge faced by the regional countries primarily emanates from domestic sources of conflict and not external. But, those state actors in South Asia, who have a vested interest in expressing support to the U.S. war on terrorism forget the fact that their focus and concentration should be on resolving issues, which trigger violent and terrorist acts. And most of the factors, which result into the outbreak of terrorism in South Asia are domestic in nature. However, there should be



better coordination and share of intelligence between South Asia and other countries and organizations.

4. There is also a need for media, both print and electronic to play a responsible role for dealing with the challenge of terrorism. According to an Indian sociologist, “there is a symbolic relationship between terrorism and the media. The terrorists rely on the media to further their terror-inspiring goals. Whatever, many be the form of terrorism, either the individual against the state or state-sponsored acts of terrorism, the perpetrator’s strategy involves the use and instrumentalization of the media.<sup>1</sup> What happens is the misreporting or wrong coverage of facts in a particular terrorist event, which results into the escalation of tension. Particularly, when there is a terrorist attack in India or in Pakistan, any improper handling of such an attack by the media can be counter productive and augment the level of mistrust and suspicion between the two countries. Professional management of violent and terrorist events in South Asia by the local media is essential so that unnecessary tension is not created. Both the governmental and private print and electronic media should reach a ‘code of conduct’ which should bound them of responsible coverage of events which involve violent or terrorist acts. This issue could be exhaustively discussed by the Information Ministers of SAARC in their meeting so that a policy on media reporting on violent and terrorist issues could be formulated and implemented.
5. Since in most cases, terrorism is a ‘homegrown’ phenomenon in South Asia, it is imperative that there should be a focus on ‘human security’ rather than pursuing ‘non-traditional’ security approach. This would require drastic socio-economic reforms, which could empower those communities who are, marginalized sections of society. Good governance, functional democracy and the rule of law are the three measures, which if properly applied in South Asia can help marginalize violent and terrorist groups in the region.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Grahman Evans and Jeffrey Newham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 530. According to the *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, the word terrorist has been defined as, “a person who uses or favors violent and intimidating methods of coercing a government or community.” See, Sara Tullock (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1613.

<sup>2</sup> Sridhar Khatri, “Introduction” in Sridhar Khatri and Gert W. Kueck (eds.), *Terrorism in South Asia Impact on Development and Democratic Process* (New Delhi: Shipra, 2003), p.1. Also see, Dipanker Banerjee and Gert W. Kueck (eds.), *South Asia and the War on Terrorism* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Before September 11, Islamabad was reluctant to take serious action against various *Jihadi* groups as “Pakistan’s steady resolve not to overthrow the *Lashkar-e-Tayba* (LT) and *Harakat-Ul-Mujahiden* (HUM) and other Islamic hard line parties which Washington labels of ‘terrorists’ organizations, keeps that South Asian country very close to being branded as a State which sponsors terrorism. For Pakistan, the issue of banning the LT and other such groups was much more complicated than merely labeling them as terrorist entities and then outlawing them. Islamic parties served a very important aspect of Pakistan Foreign Policy. It

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uses these groups to keep the Kashmir dispute stirred up and there by maintain pressure on India to agree to its political solution. For further information see, Ehsan Ahrari, "Transnational Terrorism And Old Friends: Pakistan and the U.S." *Strategic Review*, Vol. XXX, No. 1, Winter 2001, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> See news item, "SAARC states vow to combat terrorism," *Dawn* (Karachi), April 5, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Parul Gupta "SAARC made little effort to fight terrorism," *Dawn* (Karachi), April 8, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See Avishag Gordon, "Terrorism as an Academic Subject after 9/11: Searching the Internet Reveals a Stockholm Syndrome Trend" in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28:45-59 (2003).

<sup>7</sup> S. Sanyal, "Media's Perception of Terrorism," *Aakrosh* (New Delhi), Vo. 9. No. 31, April 2006, p. 29.