

## COUNTERING TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA: AN ASSESSMENT ON REGIONAL APPROACH

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The 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai<sup>1</sup>, in many ways represent the rapidly evolving security landscape in South Asia<sup>2</sup>. The strategy of the new generation of terrorists in this region is increasingly becoming “post-Westphalian” in nature as can be understood from this sophisticated transnational operation. They don’t respect traditional borders or nation-states.<sup>3</sup> This paper aims to analyze the trends of transnational terrorism in South Asia and to assess the regional approach to counter it.

The cross-border dimension of many of the internal, often interrelated, security crises that seriously affect South Asian states and inter-state relations highlights the importance of developing an effective, broad-based regional response to the threat. Despite declarations regarding the need for greater collaboration among states on issues related to border security, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement, this cooperation has been slow to materialize in South Asia. The UN

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<sup>1</sup> During November 26 to 29, 2008, assault on India’s financial capital Mumbai, suspected Pakistani terrorists slipped past port security and hit targets across the city, including two hotels, a railway terminal, a café and a Jewish outreach center. The multi-pronged rampage, carried out with automatic weapons and grenades, left more than 170 dead and some 300 wounded –provoking swift international condemnation. For details, see “Mumbai: The Region Responds After Attacks, Counterterrorism Programs Rise,” in *Asia Pacific Defense Forum*, Vol. 34, Issue 1, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2009.

<sup>2</sup> South Asia is defined here as a region of the Asian continent comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. These countries are members of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) a regional organization established in 1985. The geographic contours of South Asia are a matter of perspective. The modern definition of South Asia includes not just the sub-continental Asia but also the adjacent littorals of the southern states of Central Asia, Iran, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

<sup>3</sup> These groups mostly exploit ungoverned and under-governed areas for safe haven, as places to rest, to recruit, to train, to plan operations.

strategy—which all countries in the region have endorsed—could be used to stimulate more cooperation and the development of a strengthened regional response. In this context, it is important to strengthen the capacity of regional institutions to build a better and pragmatic safeguard against terrorism.

Transnational terror is the most serious national security challenge confronting the world today. Dealing with the challenge in the long term requires a change of mentality and a global plan of action backed by a coherent and concerted micro and macro response from the individual states as well as regional institutions. In South Asia, institutions like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)<sup>4</sup> need to be involved. Involving the regional institutions and providing multi-national support especially from the UN in strengthening them, can be an approach through which the risk of violent extremism in South Asia can be effectively reduced.

South Asia constitutes one of the critical regions or “security complexes”<sup>5</sup> in the world. The current security landscape of South Asia is marked by diversity of conflict, a sharp rise of terrorism<sup>6</sup> and political

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<sup>4</sup> Since BIMSTEC efforts are still in their infancy and currently lack resources to effect change this analysis narrows down the focus on SAARC only. But BIMSTEC efforts represent a promising start toward a more comprehensive counterterrorism program. It can be noted that BIMSTEC involves South East Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand.

<sup>5</sup> “Security complex” refers to a group of states whose primary security concerns are so deeply intertwined that each nation’s security concerns cannot be considered apart from one another. For this definition and further exploration of the concept of security complex, see Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press), 1983, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Hoffman defines terrorism as: “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change. All terrorist acts involve violence or the threat of violence. Terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack. It is meant to instill fear within, and thereby intimidate, a ‘wider audience’ that might include a rival ethnic or religious group, an entire country, a national government or political party, or public opinion in general. Terrorism is designed to create power where there is none or to consolidate power where there is very little. Through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or

violence with significant destabilizing effect on the regional states and their economies. The historic rivalry of two nuclear powers India and Pakistan, the rise of transnational crime, overt and covert radicalization of various segments of the population, have made the picture too complex and dangerous for the 1.5 billion people of the region as well as to international security.

From the last 10 years trend it appears that the transnational terrorist groups have the capacity to destabilize South Asia by dragging India and Pakistan into a militarized crisis. Back in 2001, a major Indo-Pakistani militarized crisis took place after a failed attack on the Indian parliament—involving Lashkar-e-Taiba. That attack failed. About five people died, and it was over in the space of a morning. Nonetheless, the Indians were so outraged that they mobilized about 5,00,000 troops along the international border, and there was a major standoff that lasted almost a year. That attack on the Indian parliament was in Paul Kapur's view "a lot less provocative than Mumbai."<sup>7</sup> After the Mumbai attack he even predicted that a military response from India was certainly possible. But in reality India responded quite differently. Much of the debate among Indians has looked inward, focusing on their government's lack of preparedness, poor intelligence and bungling response to the attack. India did not rush to war with Pakistan. A reason why Military action was ruled out by India could be the 'parity' of strength accorded to Pakistan because of its nuclear capability. Besides being strategically decisive, India's restraint and quest for pragmatism perhaps symbolize maturity in its strategic culture; but the fact remains that transnational terror groups like LeT has the capacity to destabilize and seriously affect Indo-Pak relations with Mumbai-style attacks, and thereby make these two big players of South Asia locked in political crisis.

With the troubled Af-Pak boarder, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, LeT, Pakistani Taliban, and economic slowdown, Pakistan is facing its worst crisis since 1971. "While the period of 2004-2005 was characterized by

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international scale. For details see, Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Kapur in an interview with *Stanford Report*. For the full transcript see Adam Gorlick, "Q & A: South Asia Security Expert Discusses Terrorist Attacks in Mumbai," *Stanford Report*, Stanford News Service, December 4, 2008. <http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2008/december3/kapur-010709.html>.