



The Need for Enhanced Regional Responses to Terrorism in South Asia

*Gen. V.P. Malik**

The people of South Asia are constantly threatened by the specter of terrorist activity and fear that weapons of mass destruction will fall into the wrong hands. We urgently need a new approach to address the threat of political violence on the subcontinent. What is required is a comprehensive grand strategy that emphasizes secular tolerance and moderation in order to win hearts and minds, while limiting the use of force to occasions when it is absolutely necessary. Implementing such a strategy will require more inclusive, holistic, and coordinated approaches to building counterterrorism capacities and partnerships across the region and with other stakeholders, such as the United Nations.

The United Nations

The United Nations is acknowledged worldwide for the critical role it plays in addressing transnational security challenges, including terrorism. Yet, its contribution has been limited due to the lack of a common strategic vision. The most influential members of the Security Council have yet to appreciate the interlocking nature of security threats caused by terrorism and the need to design and build sustainable capacities to address them in a holistic and sociopolitically sensitive manner in affected regions. For its part, the United Nations needs to develop a horizontally integrated approach to meet transnational terrorism challenges, with sufficient flexibility to engage with individual countries in a nuanced but inclusive manner. Affected nations need greater capacity-building and other forms of technical assistance, but without strings or linkage to any imposed agenda. In South Asia and in many parts of the world, the

Security Council lacks legitimacy, as it is viewed as a small fraction of the membership of the United Nations imposing its will on the others. The council also lacks sufficient expertise and understanding of the complex contextual issues that must be taken into account when trying to address the threat of terrorism in high-risk areas such as South Asia, where states have vast experience with the problem of terrorism and possess local expertise not generally available to the Security Council and the teams of experts that support its counterterrorism-related committees in New York. It is increasingly clear that a separate counterterrorism architecture with an intergovernmental body of experienced professionals is needed.

Counterterrorism in South Asia

Geopolitically, South Asia represents a unified security zone, with India in the middle. India has special ties—ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical—with each of its neighbors to a degree not shared among other states in the region. Currently, the whole of South Asia from Afghanistan to Bangladesh is going through internal unrest and upheavals arising from a range of destabilizing factors, including ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, and intense political polarization. The lack of political consensus and a comprehensive collective strategy to bring focus to much-needed capacity-building efforts in South Asia has left the region ill equipped to tackle the threat. Despite committing themselves to several South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conventions on terrorism,¹ many states continue to provide direct or indirect support to terrorist organizations.

“Currently, the whole of South Asia from Afghanistan to Bangladesh is going through internal unrest and upheavals arising from a range of destabilizing factors, including ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, and intense political polarization.”



**Gen. V. P. Malik (ret.), a former chief of the Indian army, is currently president of the Institute of Security Studies at the Observer Research Foundation and a member of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation's international advisory council.*

Lack of commitment to address the threat of terrorism is a major concern, and it could lead to more widespread instability if all nations in the region fail to take the threat seriously and work together to tackle the transnational dimensions of the threat. Cross-border terrorist activities can easily escalate into a conventional war between nations. India and Pakistan have faced such situations in 1947–1948, 1965, 1971, 1999 and 2001–2002. Even today, most people on both sides of the border believe that if something like the 26 November 2008 Mumbai carnage happens in India again, there might be a military reaction that could trigger a war.

It is therefore imperative that every nation on the subcontinent substantially raise their level of commitment and work in earnest to build trust and confidence. South Asian nations should take voluntary action against terrorist activities on their soil rather than complain or respond to complaints from each other. Governments must not be hypocritical when dealing with internationally identified cross-border terrorists, as is happening with the perpetrators of the heinous Mumbai attacks. Genuine cooperative efforts can produce security improvements, particularly in securing borders, disrupting terrorist financing, and restricting terrorist movements. These efforts are best undertaken at the bilateral or multilateral level, with international monitoring where necessary.

Given the lack of trust between governments in the region, there must also be greater focus on civil society and private sector actors, which can play an indispensable role in supporting efforts to prevent terrorism. Building cooperative regional networks of civil society and private sector actors can also help build trust and lay the groundwork for greater cooperation between states in the region.

A New Approach Strategy

The need for a regional strategy and cooperation is essential. At the ideological level, terrorist groups do not believe in the values of democracy, multiculturalism, and ethnic and religious tolerance. More must be done to build and support institutional frameworks at the regional level in South Asia

to promote these values, rather than continuing to place too much emphasis on military approaches that can easily descend into anarchy. Terrorism is not just a military problem. It is primarily a sociopolitical and socioeconomic problem. A viable counterterrorism strategy, therefore, should not only concentrate on stopping violence but must question and condemn irrational ideologies that undermine the development of healthy democratic institutions and good governance. For this reason, both hard power as well as soft power must be used and calibrated to deal with violent armed terrorists while ensuring that human rights as well as our culture and traditions are protected.

An effective counterterrorism strategy for the region should also integrate cross-cutting issues that take into account linkages with transnational organized crime, illicit drugs, money laundering, illegal arms trafficking, and the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, biological, and other potentially deadly materials and their means of delivery. Building capacities to counter all of these often interrelated threats makes sense from organizational and economic perspectives. Establishing a regional counterterrorism center with experts from countries throughout the subcontinent who can share expertise and knowledge on the range of transnational threats outlined above would help to ensure a more seamless regional approach that could then serve as a platform for legal assistance to different countries in the region in matters relating to early investigations and prosecution.

Drawing from the India Experience

India has a population of more than 1 billion spread over 3.1 billion square kilometers. There are 16 major languages and more than 200 dialects spoken by a dozen ethnic groups across seven major religious communities with several sects and subjects in 68 sociocultural subregions. All are part of a developing, semiliterate society. The ancient, multiethnic, and multicultural diversity has its positive and negative points, which makes India's national security quite complex.

India has been a victim of terrorism for longer than most countries, yet it has handled the threat with some success in Mizoram, Punjab, and several other parts of our country. More importantly, it has not allowed terrorism to politically or economically destabilize the country.

India has adopted a multipronged approach and treats terrorism as a phenomenon with political, economic, social, perceptual, psychological, operational, and diplomatic aspects, all of which need equal and simultaneous attention. To ensure a holistic approach, India has a system of unified command in terrorism-affected areas, under a governor or an elected chief minister, with committees made up of relevant government functionaries.

The Indian experience with security operations in counterterrorism has been to try and win the hearts and minds of the people so that terrorists are denied moral and material support and are thus isolated. The principle of “use of minimum force” to capture or eliminate terrorists guides its actions. Human rights must be respected, and all military actions must avoid unreasonable harm. The rules of engagement are based on two forms of self-restraint: discrimination and proportionality. Where it is impossible to identify the difference between friend and a foe in such operations and often due to

deliberate provocations and stress and strain, aberrations cannot be ruled out entirely. These aberrations have to be addressed legally and in a manner as transparent as possible. At no stage can a nation afford to give full license to the security forces to operate freely. There is a requirement to define clearly their responsibility, authority, legality, and accountability.

Conclusion

There are no quick solutions when it comes to countering terrorism. The security forces can only create conditions wherein the adversary is inclined or forced to come to the negotiating table. Ultimately, the solution lies in the political domain. Success requires a genuine desire and commitment to counter terrorism that has not yet materialized among all South Asian nations. To address this shortcoming, South Asian governments need to increase cooperation, build trusted networks, seek informed support of their people, provide effective governance, and engage closely with the international community. Unfortunately, several vested interests within our nations feel insecure and perpetuate mistrust between nations. For that reason, public awareness and interaction with civil society and the private sector become important. Only then shall we be able to succeed in eliminating terrorism, preventing instability, and avoiding conflicts.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

Notes

¹ For examples of the SAARC terrorism conventions, see “SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism,” <http://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv18-english.pdf>; “Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism,” <http://www.saarc-sec.org/data/summit12/additionalprotocolterrorism.pdf>; and “Partnership for Growth for Our People,” declaration at the 15th SAARC summit, Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 2–3, 2008, <http://www.saarc-sec.org/data/summit15/summit15declaration.htm>

The Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation is a nonpartisan research and policy organization that works to improve internationally coordinated responses to the continually evolving threat of terrorism by providing governments and international organizations with timely, policy-relevant research and analysis. Building on its years of research on regional and international counterterrorism initiatives, the Center continues to identify ways to strengthen nonmilitary counterterrorism efforts.

To learn more, visit www.globalct.org.



POLICY BRIEF

DC Office

1111 19th Street, NW, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20036

Phone: (202) 464-6009 | Fax: (202) 238-9604

New York Office

801 Second Avenue, 13th Floor
New York, NY 10017

Phone: (212) 682-0998 | Fax: (212) 697-3316