

Building Stronger Partnerships to Prevent Terrorism
Regional Response to Terrorism

By
General V P Malik*

Introduction

There is rarely a lucky day in South Asia when our people are not confronted with an act of terrorism; somewhere or the other, in some form or another, for some reason or the other. Terrorism in South Asia ebbs and flows.

At the outset, let me emphasize that terrorism is neither definable within geographical boundaries, nor within traditional moulds of rationality. Terrorist groups do not owe loyalty to any national flag, religion, or ethnic society. They extinguish innocent lives as if these are legitimate victims. They seek martyrdom in suicide missions. At present, the threat is mostly through ground actions. But we all know that there are very real prospects of the terrorist groups acquiring higher technology; even Weapons of Mass Destruction.

I also need to point out that the so called ‘war on terrorism’ has been a misnomer. Terrorism is neither state specific nor an ideology. It is a method of employing violence in pursuit of a mission; political, social, ideological... whatever. Second World War was not against *blitzkrieg*, but against Nazism which used *blitzkrieg* to overrun Europe.

What is required is a comprehensive grand strategy-of secular tolerance, moderation, winning hearts and minds; isolation of and use of the stick only on those who perpetrate violence. Its implementation involves more inclusive, holistic and coordinated approaches to building counter terrorism capacities and partnerships, with and within affected regions.

Role of the United Nations (UN) and Democratic Societies

The UN is globally acknowledged for the critical role it has in addressing transnational security challenges including terrorism. Yet, its contribution has been

limited due to lack of a common strategic vision. Its key members in the Security Council have not yet appreciated the interlocking nature of security threats caused by terrorism, and the need to design and build capacities to address them, in a holistic and socio-politically sensitive manner in affected regions. I believe that:

- The UN needs to develop a horizontally integrated approach to meet transnational terrorism challenges, with sufficient flexibility to engage with individual countries, in a nuanced but integrated manner.
- Affected nations need greater technical assistance and capacity building, but without strings or linkage to any imposed agenda.
- UN Security Council Resolution 1540 remains ineffective because it has failed to monitor activities of nations and individuals, who the whole world knows have indulged in secret transnational sale of WMD expertise and materials.
- The Security Council lacks legitimacy and expertise. Regions and states, more affected by terrorism and possessing local knowledge and expertise, do not have a place in the Security Council. We need a separate counter terrorism architecture; of inter-governmental body of professionals with experience.

Democratic societies are most vulnerable to terrorism because pluralism, peaceful co-existence, dialogue as the basis of resolution of differences, adult franchise, promotion and protection of human rights: all these are an anathema to the terrorist groups. Such democratic societies challenge the very cause and rationale of terrorists' existence. We believe that hard core democratic nations should play a more significant role in the UN and outside. They would more naturally develop inclusive, multi-lateral institutions and multi-national coordination. Blocking finance, disrupting networks, sharing intelligence, simplifying extradition procedures: such preventive measures will be more effective when international cooperation is based on trust and shared values.

Counter Terrorism in South Asia

Geo-politically, South Asia represents an integral security zone, with India in the middle. India has special ties with each of her neighbors—of ethnicity, language, culture, and history—of a degree of intensity that is not shared by any two others. Currently, the whole of South Asia—India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—is going through internal unrest and upheavals due to ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, or just cursed political polarization that encourage and use terrorism. Even the adjoining Chinese provinces of Tibet and Xinkiang are affected. The terrorists' activities have a history of crossing national boundaries, often leading to inter-state tensions.

The terrorist situation in South Asia has deteriorated primarily due to lack of political consensus, a comprehensive collective strategy, a will to implement, and capacity building. Despite committing themselves to several South Asia Association of Regional Countries (SAARC) conventions, (SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism-1987, Summit Declaration adopted on 6th January 2002 at Kathmandu, and the Additional Protocol to the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism of January 6, 2004 to update the Convention to meet the obligations devolving in terms of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) many nations continue to provide direct or indirect support to terrorist organizations.

A few nations in South Asia carry the belief that someone's terrorist can be someone else's freedom fighter. Or, one group of terrorists is anti national, and another, its 'first line of defense'. Such notions are puerile. Any pre-meditated and unlawful act of violence against innocent people or non-combatants, irrespective of its cause and motive, is nothing but terrorism. Such notions reflect lack of commitment to counter terrorism. I must repeat what I have been stating ever since 1999, which is that, *'Terrorism is a double-edged weapon. It is like a wicked dog which often bites the hand that feeds it.'* Almost all nations in South Asia have suffered from such experiences. I also believe that *'cross border terrorists' activities can easily*

escalate into a conventional war between nations.' India and Pakistan have faced such situations in 1947-48, 1965, 1971, 1999 and 2001-02. Even today, most people on both sides of the border believe that if something like the 26/11 Mumbai carnage happens in India again, there might be a military reaction which could trigger into a war.

So, the most important requirement to counter terrorism in South Asia is for all nations to raise the level of commitment, trust and confidence. South Asian nations should take voluntary action against terrorists' activities on their soil rather than complain, or respond to complaints from each other. We can not be hypocritical when dealing with internationally identified cross border terrorists, as is happening with the perpetrators of Mumbai carnage. Genuine cooperative efforts only can produce security improvements-particularly in securing borders, disrupting terrorist financing, and restricting their movements. This is best done at the bilateral or multilateral level, with international monitoring where necessary. And since there is lack of trust between governments, there must be greater focus on civil societies and private sector; NGOs, social and cultural organizations and other such bodies.

A New Approach and Strategy

Terrorists' activities anywhere will stop only when their fuel runs out. There is a need to combat and defeat the menace in all its manifestations. We need a regional strategy and cooperation, but essentially local operatives and doctrines. Here, I wish to make a few important points.

One! At the ideological level, this war is between terrorist groups which do not believe in values of democracy, multiculturalism, ethnic and religious tolerance. Given the fragility of institutional framework in affected areas and volatility of developments, a pure military approach can easily descend into anarchy. I support

those who believe that ‘ideologues’ should be included in the operational fight against terrorism.

Two! We need to devise collaborative strategies at the highest level. But a uniform top down strategy can not be applied everywhere. Counter terrorism operational strategies and action plans need be worked out for each region and each location. It must take into cognizance the indigenous and local factors to neutralize terror networks. We need to build on elements of stability, nurture democratic impulses, nudge regimes to provide greater socio-political and socio-economic justice and engage in dialogues. Leadership that emanates through democratic processes has to play a greater role in such partnerships.

Three! Counter-terrorism strategy and cooperation should deal with all aspects of international terrorism: its linkages with transnational organized crime, illicit drugs, money laundering, illegal arms trafficking, and proliferation of nuclear, chemical, biological and other potentially deadly materials and their means of delivery. It should seek a firm commitment, and action, to meet cross-border threats posed by the terrorists.

Four! Terrorism is not just a military problem. It is primarily a socio-political and socio-economic problem. In the counter terrorism strategy, besides checking violence, we must combat and isolate the *ideology* that is irrational and not acceptable to modern society. We have to use all elements of national power; not just military but political, economic and other kinds of persuasion and pressures. We need both hard power as well as soft power: hard power to deal with violent armed terrorists, and soft power to deal humanely with societies, their culture, traditions and ethos. The intellectual and psychological dimensions of the terrorists’ threat and counter terrorism are as important as its physical dimension. Youth organizations, educational networks, women’s empowerment, and local

development initiatives should all play a role, with government as a supportive partner.

Important elements of that collective strategy and action plan would have to be:

- **Establishment of a Regional Counter Terrorism Centre with experts from different countries to provide professional guidance and secretarial support to the SAARC political leadership, and to monitor implementation of their Resolutions in letter and spirit.**
- **Capacity building in combating terrorism by intelligence, police, Para military and military in each other's schools of instructions; thus learning from varied experience. To combat terrorists, force multipliers for surveillance, night fighting and precision targeting is more important. Heavy weapons should be avoided to prevent collateral damage and alienation.**
- **A common data-base at the regional level, a multilateral/bilateral intelligence sharing, and a mechanism for joint interrogation of important suspects and terrorist leaders.**
- **Trust and transparency of action against terrorists' sanctuaries or camps, and also against States or people sponsoring terrorism.**
- **Effective joint action against terrorist-funding, gun running and narcotics production and smuggling.**
- **Legal assistance to each other in matters relating to early investigations and prosecution.**
- **Greater liaison and coordination for planning and execution of counter terrorism operations. This would require certain amount of inter operability. The backbone of such interoperability are joint training, sets of common inter operable communication systems and operating procedures.**

Our Experience in India

India has a population of over 1 billion spread over 3.1 billion square kilometers. We have people speaking 16 major languages and over 200 dialects. There are a dozen ethnic groups, seven major religious communities with several sects and sub sects, and 68 socio-cultural sub regions: all part of a developing, semi-literate society. The ancient, multi ethnic and multi cultural diversity has its positive and negative points, which makes our national security quite complex.

India has been one of the longest victims of terrorism. But we have also handled terrorism successfully in Mizoram, Punjab and several other parts of our country. More importantly, we have not allowed terrorism to politically or economically destabilize our nation.

We adopt a multi-pronged approach and treat 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, we have a system of unified command in terrorism affected areas, under a Governor or an elected Chief Minister, with committees made up of all the earlier mentioned functionaries.

The Indian experience of security operations in counter terrorism has been (a) the politico-military aim of such operations is to win hearts and minds of the people so that terrorists are denied moral and material support and are thus isolated (b) employ the principle of ‘use of minimum force’ to capture or eliminate terrorists, and (c) 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. However, it is also recognized that in such operations where it is impossible to identify the difference between a friend and a foe, its stress and strain, and often due to deliberate provocations, it is not possible to rule out aberrations. These aberrations have to be dealt with legally, in

as transparent manner as possible. At no stage can a nation afford to give a 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 to counter terrorism. The security forces can only create conditions wherein the adversary is inclined to, or is forced to come to the negotiating table. Ultimately, the solution lies in the political domain; within national constitutions, and sometimes with slightly modified constitutions.

The key success factor is a genuine desire and commitment to counter terrorism. That unfortunately is yet to be seen amongst South Asian nations. South Asian governments need to cooperate, build trusted networks, seek informed support of their people, provide effective governance, and engage closely with international community. Unfortunately, there are several vested interests within our nations, who feel insecure, and thus encourage a feeling of insecurity and mistrust between nations. For that reason, public awareness and working with civil society and private sector becomes important. Only then shall we be able to succeed in eliminating terrorism, prevent instability, and avoid conflicts.

**Former Chief of Indian Army. President, Observer Research Foundation (Institute of Security Studies).*