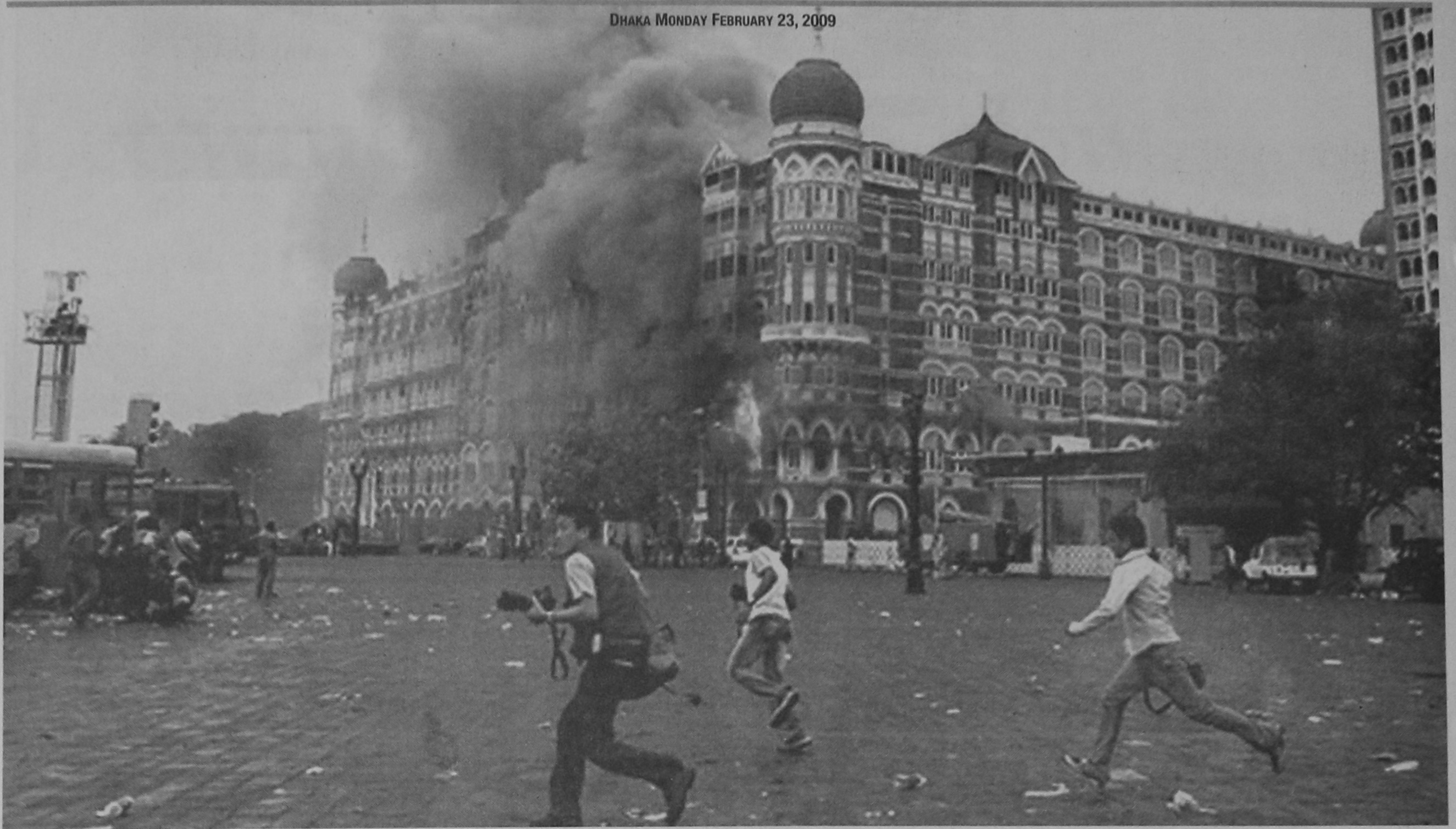


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# The framework for a task force exists

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**P** RIME Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government have understandably attached one of the top most priorities to combating terrorism and militancy in the region. In this context Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has proposed creation of a Regional Task Force for South Asia to deal with it. Not much detail has been given about the nature, scope and modalities of the proposed task force beyond what prime minister said in the parliament on the subject and in her brief media interview.

Based on my experience as a UN REGIONAL Representative in Kosovo and drawing from the lessons learnt from the experience of other countries involved in the global fight against terrorism it would seem inadvisable to place disproportionate emphasis on security-military-police dimension of terrorism and militancy to the neglect of other important aspects while evolving a sound strategy for combating terrorism and militancy. While beefing and training of the police force and intelligence are undoubtedly important what is required is the truly comprehensive approach which would address the root cause of terrorism and militancy in all its form and manifestation. Hence I would suggest that the following elements, among others, be kept in mind while evolving the strategy for counter-terrorism and militancy:

- That in the ultimate analysis there is no purely military solution or use of force approach to terrorism and militancy;
- That truly lasting peace can only be achieved if it is built in the hearts and minds of the people; the battle to win hearts and mind is equally, if not more important, than physical battle to eliminate the terrorists and militants;
- That the battle to win hearts and minds of the people has to begin

from the school and home at the tender impressionable age of children. Hence the content of education and role of parents and elders are of crucial importance. There should be no hate speech in the curricula and human right education should start from the school. There is need for a total overhauling of the Education system in general and madrasa education particular. Religious education should be combined with liberal education, moral science, math, science and computer education;

- That the society should endeavour to become truly enlightened ensuring democratic values of tolerance, individual rights of freedom of speech, writing, of dissent, free media and respect for rights of minorities, women, tribal and the disadvantaged; such a democratic society would be invariably better poised to win fight against terrorism and militancy than a totalitarian and authoritarian society;
- That the society should endeavour not only to be democratic but also egalitarian ensuring that the basic needs of the people for job, food, health care, shelter and education etc are met; an equitable economic system which will provide equal opportunity for all citizens;
- Rule of law: there can be no democratic society without rule of law and alleged terrorist should be presumed to be innocent until proven guilty; and trial must be conducted through due process of law and in conformity with the highest standards of justice, fairness and human rights. There would then be no scope for torture of alleged terrorists in detention which only breeds new terrorists.

Conflict resolution- the unresolved issues, both domestic and foreign, should be resolved through negotiations so that the energies and resources of the country could be utilised to fight terrorism. This also helps significantly to boost economic

development.

Reverting to the proposal of Task Force for South Asia to combat terrorism and militancy, I feel that such a task force, if felt essential, should be formed within the framework of SAARC. The reason is twofold: a) SAARC has made important progress in the fight against terrorism and militancy which needs to be carried forward. It may be recalled that as early as November, 1987 the SAARC Foreign Ministers signed the "SAARC Regional Convention On Suppression Of Terrorism." The signing of the convention which was preceded by protracted and intricate negotiations among SAARC member states on the definition of terrorism itself was a positive step forward as it embodied the collective commitment of the leaders of south Asia to fight terrorism in the region. The convention, among other things, recalled that at the Dhaka summit of December 7-8, 1985 the heads of state or government of SAARC "recognised the seriousness of the problem of terrorism as it affects the security and stability of the region" and recalled the Bangalore Summit Declaration "that cooperation among SAARC states was vital if terrorism was to be prevented and eliminated from the region; UN equivocally condemned all acts, methods and practices of terrorism as criminal and deplored their impact on life and property, socio-economic development, political stability, regional and international peace and cooperation, and recognised the importance of the principles laid down in UN resolution 2625 (xxv) which inter alia required that each state should refrain from organising, instigating, assisting or participating in acts of civil strife or terrorist acts in another state or acquiescing in organised activities within its territory directed towards the commission of such acts."

I have quoted this at some length as this is highly significant in as much as it reflects the collective commit-

ment of the leaders of South Asia at the highest political levels to fight terrorism and militancy

The collective commitment of South Asian leaders to combat terrorism-militancy was once again forcefully reaffirmed at the Colombo SAARC summit of August, 2008 at which another important reinforcing document to fight terrorism namely, "the SAARC convention on mutual

peace and security such as energy, food security, climate change, economic development, trade and investment, though much remains to be done. SAARC has also given emphasis on greater people-to-people contact and interaction amongst intelligentsia to fight terrorism, militancy, and extremism. It is rightly said "peace can only be built on the intellectual and moral solidar-

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assistance in criminal matters was signed." Both the two SAARC conventions on terrorism constitute a solid basis to move forward by giving concrete shape and reality to the fight against terrorism and militancy. The need is for the proposed task force to build on what has been achieved by SAARC so far and not open a new book of genesis.

If only this collective commitment of heads of state and government of SAARC was translated into collective political will we would not have required forming a Task Force now.

Another distinct advantage is that if the proposed task force operates within the framework of SAARC it would be able to adopt a comprehensive and holistic approach to fighting terrorism. SAARC has made some progress in the vital areas of non-military/non-traditional threats to

ity of humankind." The proposed Task Force would have greater possibility of success if it works within this larger framework of SAARC.

If the government forms the task force within the framework of SAARC for reasons stated above it will be more effective and purposeful to combat the menace of terrorism and militancy. More importantly, it is likely to have better chance to be acceptable to political parties both inside and outside the parliament and to the people at large. Bangladesh's diplomatic effort have to be concentrated on convincing other SAARC member-states, particularly India and Pakistan, to accept this proposal. This would be an acid test for the new government's diplomacy.

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