

REGIONAL TRENDS IN TERRORISM

Comprehensive response and national security

IFTEKHARUL BASHAR

SOUTH Asia is known to constitute one of the "critical regions" or "security complexes" in the world. The current situation of security in the region is marked by diversity of conflict, with a sharp rise in terrorism and political violence often resulting in significant destabilizing effect on the regional states and their economies.

Rapidly evolving regional trends of terrorism underscores Bangladesh's necessity to consider a comprehensive response strategy for national security. Though Bangladesh has achieved much in several areas of counterterrorism, the evolving trends should be taken into consideration to make counterterrorism more dynamic and proactive.

Some of the terror groups in South Asia are clearly home-grown and indigenous but the contiguous geography, extra-territorial allegiance of some non-state actors, global rise of extremist ideology, technological innovations, transnational crime, faulty statecraft, weakness of regional institutions, and mismanagement of inter-state relations make it evident that the line between indigenous terrorism and transnational terrorism is thin. This makes a case where terrorism in South Asia needs to be studied both at indigenous and transnational dimensions. Therefore, counterterrorism strategy of all the regional states in South Asia needs to be refocused on the developments in the region.

Many threat groups in the region are not necessarily top-down outfits but rather decentralized and informal organizations that function under a cell structure emphasizing autonomy while still taking major directives from the top. Such structure is often a disadvantage for counterterrorism because even if the leadership is eliminated the cells develop new leadership. Small and less known groups also have the

capability to carry out large operations.

The latest trends in South Asia makes it evident that the terror groups have attained capability to carry out complex, large scale and technologically sophisticated terror attacks. The recent attacks clearly indicate that some South Asian terrorist groups have cross border linkages and mobility and they have developed an independent capacity to plan and prosecute transnational operations. Hostage taking in large numbers and dramatic engagement with the security forces is a comparatively new trend.

The recent developments in Pakistan indicate that the militants have already gained bargaining power. The Government of Pakistan had to negotiate for a peace deal with the Taliban in Swat and had to make painful concessions. As a result, the government is foregoing some of its legitimate power in favour of the Taliban. This is in fact going to be one of the most significant strategic advances for the Taliban in that region. It will not be a surprise if this move inspires other militant groups in the region who support, sympathise with, or share the same ideology.

If we consider the recent attacks, almost all were carried out without any warning. Therefore, the security agencies largely depended on reactive response. However, in many South Asian cases intelligence failure was prevalent. It is often argued that due to more emphasis on reactive response, the prospect of proactive response remains underestimated and inadequately explored. More emphasis should be given on proactive response so that the incidents can be intercepted, and more lives can be saved.

The pattern of recent attacks in the region indicates that most of the attacks were well planned, well coordinated, and they were well equipped. Multiple group operation is a new phenomenon.

These operations give terrorist groups strategic benefits; it minimises cost and maximises catastrophe.

Overlapping terrorist activities with transnational crime, using the same supply, transport, and money-moving networks is a dangerous trend. It poses a very real threat by making counter terrorism more difficult without a specific framework for regional responses in combating transnational crime.

Several research reports show that threat groups are becoming more innovative in terms of managing their finance. Terrorist financing continues despite the fact that the legal safeguards have been much improved since 9/11. Rather than depending on external resources they are concentrating on domestic resources.

Terrorism in South Asia has some regional characteristics. For example, incidents of suicide attacks were low in comparison to the Middle East. But in recent times the number of such incidents is growing in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The threat groups in Bangladesh do not seem to prefer suicide attacks as a tactic. In many cases they carried out low intensity attacks and depended on hand-made bombs.

In recent years, however, Arges grenades have become a new and more dependable option for the terrorists. This weapon, if it explodes three feet above the ground, sprays shrapnel up to a kill-distance of 25 feet in which at least forty per cent of the area is bound to be penetrated unless stopped by an obstruction. It could be, blatantly or stealthily, planted or lobbed amidst a gathering of people with time delays of up to seven seconds, and create mayhem.

City centers are increasingly becoming the most preferred targets of South Asian terrorist groups. This gives them an opportunity to dramatize the incidents and to get good media coverage. The incidents

in India and Pakistan show that international hotels have become a prime target. Westerners are often the prime targets of the South Asian terror groups.

In South Asia, militant groups have managed to survive through the strategy of adapting and adjusting with the changes in the security environment, while simultaneously searching to identify new targets and vulnerabilities. Emergence of micro-actors seems to be the new challenge to the security agencies in South Asia. Where large groups are easier to track and monitor, smaller groups are very difficult to handle. With motivation, equipment and know-how two to three persons can carry out deadly attacks.

The ideological, motivational and propaganda ability of South Asian threat groups are increasing. As we focus exclusively on the surface of terrorism, the roots remain undisturbed and are spreading at a dangerous pace. It has been found that most of the terrorists were enshrined into radical ideology at some point of time.

Radical ideologies set the political goals, justify the means to attain them, define the 'enemy' to fight with, and mobilize popular support to survive and sustain. All these inputs cumulatively influence the acts of terror.

Self-radicalisation is a real challenge to the counter terrorism experts. Self-radicalisation is believed largely to be a post-9/11 phenomenon. These groups get inspiration from the media and the internet. Self-radicalised terrorists are hard to track since most of them have no previous records of crime whatsoever. Quite often self-radicalisation remains unnoticed until the person carries out an attack. This is precisely a reason why counter terrorism strategy should include counter radicalisation.

Terrorist groups 'traditionally' use border areas and remote areas for hideouts. But there are new evidences show-

ing that currently some of the terrorist groups prefer the urban residential areas, equipped with all available communication technology.

The trends discussed above show that terrorism is not static. To ensure security the responses would have to be dynamic. The incidents in Pakistan show that counterterrorism cannot be successful if it is left to military solutions alone. There is an urgent need to combine the hard power responses with that of soft power. We can call it 'comprehensive response.'

An effective multi-pronged, multi-agency approach is needed for Bangladesh to combat terrorism. Technically, counterterrorism can be divided into two approaches, operational and strategic.

With operational counterterrorism we are reducing the immediate threat by targeting the terrorist cells and disrupting their attack plans. Now it is time when we should also aim at changing the mindset and create a hostile environment for the terrorists through strategic counter terrorism. With this, we have to aim at changing the hearts and minds of the terrorists.

Comprehensive response is a decentralized approach to counter terrorism. Counter terrorism is too complex an issue to be left to the state alone. Comprehensive Counter terrorism is more inclusive in a sense that various segments of the society are involved to get a synergic result.

For countries like Bangladesh, comprehensive response is very appropriate as it includes image building programmes while concentrating on intelligence response, law enforcement response, legislative response, financial response, educational response, media response, developmental response, and de-radicalization. It provides pragmatic and broad-spectrum solutions covering almost all the areas of response.

The primary objectives of



Bangladesh's counterterrorism should be to ensure the security of lives and livelihoods of its citizens from terrorist attacks and "defeat the forces of terrorism that challenge the authority

of the state and legitimacy of its constitution." To achieve these two objectives, and to ensure a durable solution, the government should think out of the box and invest in pragmatic counter

terrorism and emphasize on comprehensive response.

The author is a Research Associate at Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA).

Iraq: The forgotten war

BILLY I AHMED

NOT so long ago, the term "the forgotten war" was being used to describe American lack of interest in its military occupation of Afghanistan. US domination of that country was assumed to be a carried out fact. Now the same label could be applied to Iraq and for the same reason.

To a large extent, the American ruling elite has been convinced by its own propaganda. From the President Obama administration to the Republican opposition and the mass media, there is a consensus the US troop surge to Iraq in 2007 and 2008 led to "victory".

The policies of General David Petraeus are credited largely with ending the Sunni Arab-based insurgency, crushing the anti-occupation Shiite Madhi Army militia and creating a stable "democracy" in the form of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government.

The focus now is on the Obama administration's reorientation to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, which took a back-seat under Bush's regime. The Iraq war has largely vanished from the nightly television news and the newspaper front pages. It is as though the American establishment is trying to banish from popular consciousness any memory of its war crimes against the Iraqi people.

The current relative stability was achieved through more than five years of bloody repression of Iraqi opposition to the

US invasion the most violent being the surge years.

As many as 1.2 million Iraqis lost their lives, as well as over 4,500 American and other occupying troops. The legacy of US occupation is a shattered and traumatised society, wracked by communal divisions and incapable of satisfying even the most elementary social needs of the population.

Finally, the main cause in curbing the anti-occupation insurgency was not US military operations but in fact the partition of the country along sectarian and ethnic lines.

In the country's north, Kurdish nationalists have consolidated an autonomous statelet. In the areas that have a majority Sunni population and were the centres of the resistance, militia commanders and tribal chiefs were promoted to power, in exchange for their agreement to end the fighting. The Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate Maliki's government essentially control only Baghdad and the southern provinces.

The subservience of the rival factions to US imperialism is matched only by their hostility and antagonism toward each other. Open warfare is being delayed by the continuing placement of 140,000 American troops in the country.

One of the sharpest points of tension is the continuing insistence of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that it gain control over the northern oil-rich province of Kirkuk and parts of two other provinces.

Maliki is trying to block any expansion of Kurdish nationalist power by seeking to prevent referendums being held in the disputed areas that would most likely see the majority Kurdish population vote to join the KRG.

A predominantly Arab division of the Iraqi army has been deployed around Kirkuk city and has threatened to force Kurdish peshmerga militiamen to leave the area. The threats coincide with the Iraqi oil ministry parcelling out contracts to develop eight new oil and gas fields in Kirkuk, specifically excluding companies that have entered commercial relations with the KRG in defiance of the central government.

The US military commander, General Ray Odierno, raised his concerns over Arab-Kurdish tensions in the British Times on April 7: "Lines seem to be hardening. These problems need to be solved diplomatically... They should not be solved by violence so that is what we work very carefully to make sure occurs." US troop numbers in Kirkuk have been boosted from 900 to over 3,500. They could find themselves in the middle of a civil war or the target of a Kurdish-based insurgency if KRG ambitions are thwarted.

Shiite-Sunni tensions are also rising. During the surge, under conditions of intense US operations and savage Shiite-Sunni sectarian violence, tens of thousands of Sunni insurgents entered agreements with the US military to end their resistance.

Their guerilla cells were transformed into locally based,

US-paid militias known as Awakening Councils. In return, American commanders prevented the government security forces from entering Sunni districts, stemming the frenzy of killings.

This month, responsibility for paying the Awakening Councils was transferred to the Maliki government, which is insisting the Sunni militias disband and disarm within a year. Awakening leaders have expressed fear that Sunni communities will once again be at the mercy of Shiite death squads.

Also, they are increasingly suspicious the government will not honour promises to give the militiamen alternate employment in the security forces or public service. In response to a major shortfall in the Iraqi budget, due to the slump in oil prices, government departments have begun announcing recruitment freezes or job cuts.

The distrust and discontent among the ranks of the Awakening could reignite large-scale resistance. Already, Odierno has pointed out that US troops will not be withdrawing from the cities of Mosul and Bagdabab in June because of the insurgent activity.

Even more explosive are the pent-up grievances of the Iraqi working-class and urban poor Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish alike. It is taken for granted in Washington and by the various factions of the Iraqi ruling elite the global economic crisis means there are no resources to rebuild infrastructure, provide jobs to the unemployed or lift people out of poverty and deprivation. Social struggles against the conditions facing the mass of the population are fated.

However much the Obama administration would like to shift priorities, the war in Iraq continues. So far this month, five troops have been killed in Mosul, bombings have rocked Kirkuk and a counter-insurgency operation has been launched in Fallujah.

The Baghdad's Green Zone was mortared for the first time in three months. To protect its strategic interests in Iraq and the region, the US will be compelled to continue its occupation that will need the indefinite presence of tens of thousands of American troops.

The author is a columnist and researcher.

Obama's speech in Turkey and hope for a better world

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

PRESIDENT Barak Obama is truly a breath of fresh air in every sense of the term. That his presence means Bush is no longer around is in itself great news. It is for good reasons that the story about God telling the guy who came to White House looking for Bush made such rounds on the internet. When the guy came the first day to White House and asked God about Bush, he was told he lived there no longer. The guy came a second day; asked the question again and received the same answer. When he came a third day and asked the same question, an irate God asked him why he was asking the same question knowing what the answer would be. The guy's answer, with a broad smile was, to hear from God over and over again that Bush is history.

Thus the warm welcome that President Obama received during his just-concluded first overseas trip to Europe and ME was because of the relief in these countries that he had replaced Bush in the position of the most powerful individual on earth. But this partly explains the rousing welcome he was given by the leaders and the people in these countries. The man is also to a large measure responsible for the reception he received. When he had started his campaign for the White House, he was given a long shot because of his colour. But the more his people saw him, the more they liked him for in what he spoke, there was both a moral and intellectual depth that made him comparable to the great presidents of US history, like Lincoln and Kennedy, for example. President Obama is now on the centre stage to prove that he is as good as these great US Presidents; in fact he may even have to be better to undo the harm that eight years of Bush presidency has done to US and the world.

The Bush presidency was at its worst in the way it divided the US and the Islamic world. In giving his first reaction to 9/11 on TV, President Bush had blurted out the word "crusade." His actions in Afghanistan in pursuit of Al Qaeda that he held responsible for 9/11 was supported by many countries. However, when he entered Iraq where there was no Al Qaeda or Islamic militants, the Muslim world felt that his intentions were anti-Muslim and that his reference to the crusade was by no means accidental. In fairness though it must be admitted that long afterwards, Bush did say that US is not at war with Islam but by then very few in the Islamic world believed that his war was anything but against Islam; a clash of the Western and the Islamic civilizations. President Obama's speech before the Turkish parliament during this trip where he said that

"US never is or will be at war with the Islamic world" has gone a long way in assuring Muslims that the US is not their enemy. The Islamic world's excitement has been based on other carefully crafted words in his speech such as: "many Americans have Muslims in their families; I know because I am one of them" in direct reference to his own Muslim heritage. He was introduced as Barak Hussein Obama by the Turkish speaker, the emphasis clearly on his middle name Hussein that he himself had emphasized while taking oath.

Muslim hearts worldwide have been gladdened by the speech. In his speech, President Obama extended a genuine hand of friendship to the Muslims. He acknowledged the importance of resolving the Palestinian problem that Bush had considered secondary in his foreign policy goals in ME, having taken eight months after assuming office to send his Secretary of State there who had then said that Iraq and not Palestine was the major concern of US in the region. He asserted US's commitment to the two-state policy for ending the Palestinian problem. He again reassured that Iran is not "an axis of evil" but an Islamic Republic with which US wants dialogue for friendly relations; a statement that was so dramatic as to be unbelievable when it was made by the US President in a TV address that he gave before embarking on this overseas trip. These commitments are like waking up to a bright, sunny morning after a nightmare in hell under President Bush. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit, whose country is crucial to the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict, has articulated the reaction of the Muslim world aptly by referring to it as the "first and significant" step for mitigating the tension between US and the Muslim world.

Despite his best intentions that few doubt; the odds on President Obama bridging the wide gap between the US and the Islamic world will not be easy. Newly emerging realities also add to make his task difficult. The emergence of the hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's Prime Minister is not good news although his initial reaction to Obama's resolve for peace in ME and the Palestinian state has been positive. A statement from his office said: "The government of Israel is committed to both of these goals and will formulate its policies in the near future so as to work closely with the United States." The way Pakistan is sliding toward political uncertainty and Taleban gaining ascendancy there and in Afghanistan are worrying factors. Without a stable and dependable Pakistan and an Afghanistan where Afghans are in control, US's efforts to tackle terror and militancy will falter as the border between Pakistan and

Afghanistan becomes stronger everyday as a safe haven for Al Qaeda.

On Israel-Palestine conflict, positive result will depend primarily on how forcefully President Obama can handle Israel. Netanyahu's name is enough to freeze any thought of a forward movement on the Israel-Palestine conflict, his positive reaction to Obama's speech notwithstanding. In the past, US moves in resolving the conflict faltered because the fundamental fact that the plight of the Palestinians who have been made refugees in the land that has been theirs for centuries, has not entered into the equation. Instead, the victims have been asked to make the concessions and blamed for the consequences. Recent events in Gaza have opened the eyes of even those who have so long been blind towards Israel about the mindlessness and cruelty of their behaviour towards Palestinians. It has made the Palestinian Doctor Ezzeldien Abu Al-Aish, whose three daughters were recently killed by Israelis in Gaza, a top contender for this year's Noble Peace Prize. The US alone has the power and influence, as Israel's main ally and benefactor, to settle the Palestinian problem by convincing the latter that leaving this problem unresolved has been the main reason for rise of Islamic militancy. Resolving the Palestinian problem can still take a lot of the wind out of the sail of Islamic militancy and bring US and Muslims closer. Stabilizing politics in Pakistan and Afghanistan and ending Talebans' ascendancy there will need great efforts. Getting Iran off the list of the "axis of evil" may not be enough and engaging Iran in constructive discussion could be a long drawn process. All said, President Obama has undoubtedly set US priorities in the right perspective.

The world is yearning for peace and there are hopeful signs. The worst seems to be over in Iraq, although it was achieved through the lives of thousands of US troops and hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women and children who were "collateral" victims. The scepter of a war with Iran has dissipated. Obama's presence at this moment in history is too good to be true; a black US President with Muslim heritage. Even the best of the story tellers could not have imagined, when Bush was taking the world apart, fighting his war on terror in Muslim countries that there would be a black US President, with Muslim linkage and a Muslim middle name. Only the future can tell whether Obama would bring peace to the world. For the moment, his speech in Turkey has given us the courage to hope for a peaceful world.

The writer is a former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Japan.

