

# Qaumi Madrassas and the reality

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THE World Bank Country Director recently forwarded to the government a report that is interesting in the context of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh in reality. In the last few months, the media has published series of reports and news items, many based on statements of Ministers that would suggest that Bangladesh is in imminent threat from Islamic militancy. At the time the intelligence agencies discovered a huge arsenal of arms and ammunitions in a remote village in Barisal and linked it to a Bangladesh born British national. Some concluded that the Qaumi Madrassas (QM) were hotbeds of Islamic militancy. The WB report contradicts most of these allegations.

In a seminar in BILLA, a government sponsored think tank, the alleged link between QM and Islamic terrorism was blown out of proportion. Its Director quoted from a research in which the WB report found too many potholes. The Director had said that from 2001-2006 or during the BNP government, 35% of Army soldiers were recruited from QM against 5% before 2001 elections. The other dangerous element of his statement was his conclusion that the majority of madrasa educated soldiers "are involved with militancy." The research paper that the BILLA Director quoted also mentioned that QM curricula are designed to prepare students for army entrance exams.

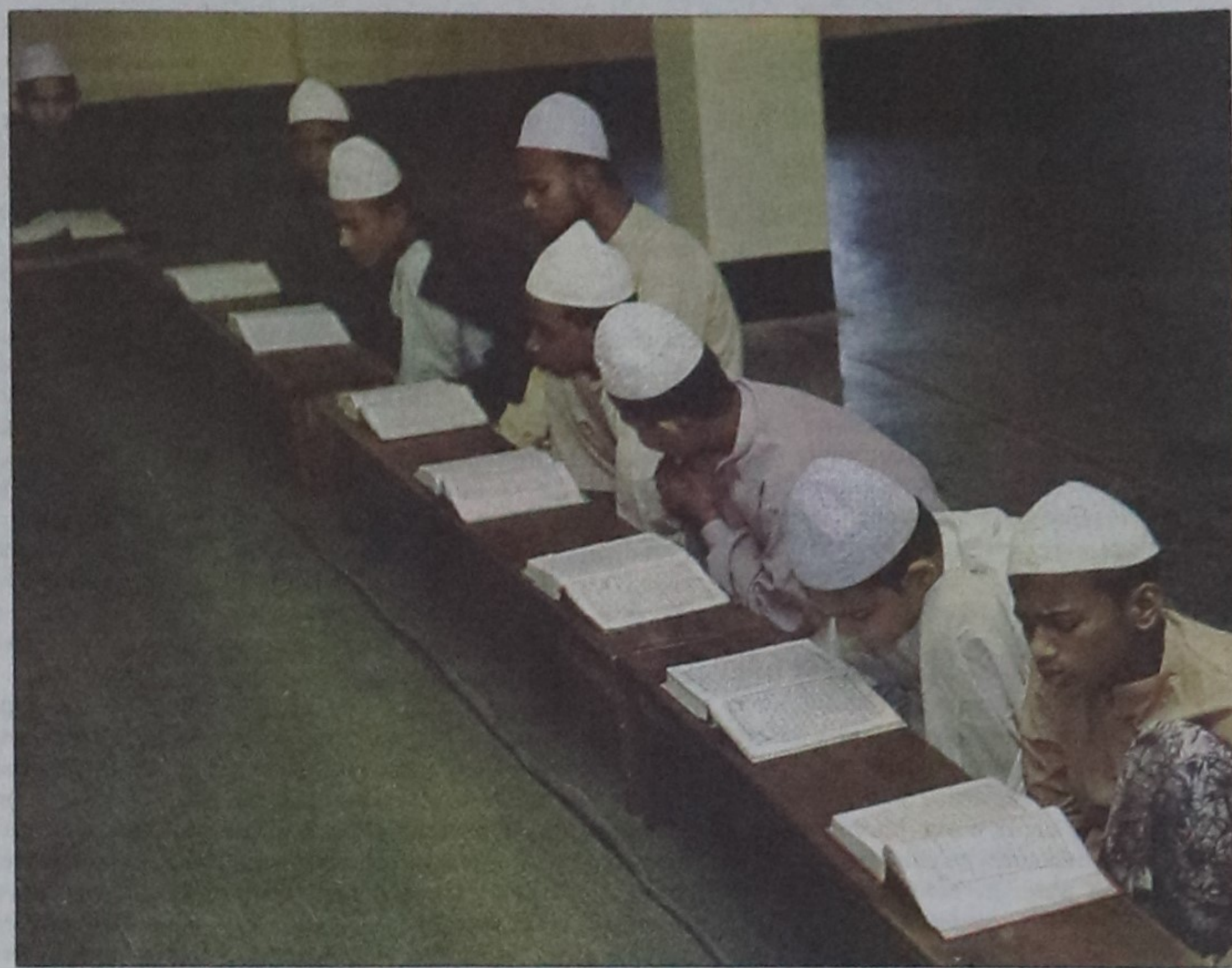
The WB report has trashed the all hitherto published news reports on QM; in particular the research paper that the BILLA Director has quoted. The Report said the QM is "doing a good job" and that it is not as well entrenched in rural Bangladesh as has been reported in the media. Only 1.9% of total rural primary enrolment is from QM. The WB report found no link in QM and militancy and has also rejected the claim of rise of madrasa educated graduates in Army as "unfounded." In this context, the Prime Minister must be given the credit for dealing with the QM issue effectively when she met with its leaders and assured them that her government has confidence in the institution and did not believe what has been said about it in the media.

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country with the overwhelming majority of them simple but firm believers in Islam as a complete code of life. Most of them are not educated enough to understand the virtues of secularism and other intellectual concepts. It is therefore very important for the government to be extremely cautious when handling Islam politically. The current debate over the Fifth Amendment to the constitution, which is now in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, must be handled with care. If the Appellate Division upholds the High Court verdict, then secularism will replace "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions" as the fourth principle

of state policy with democracy, nationalism and socialism. The Law Minister, acknowledging that the amendment could affect Islamic sentiments, has reassured the people that "bismillah" will remain before the Preamble to the Constitution although this assurance may not be enough.

The trial of the war criminals must also be handled with care. The government cannot backtrack because people voted it to power on this plank as it did on a number of other issues like "Vision 2021" and "Digital Bangladesh." There is little or no need for the government to go to the media with it because it is pledge-bound to carry it out. Media hype together with the inclination of the ministers to talk about the issue in the media will only delay the government's efforts to conduct the trials and give the opponents an excuse to use the Islamic card against the trials.

It would be foolhardy to underestimate threats of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh. But if any country facing such a threat is poised well to handle it, Bangladesh is the country only if the politics of blame-game does not intervene. One can still move about anywhere in Bangladesh without any fear of being blown up by a bomb. One cannot, however, move around in Bangladesh freely because of common criminals, some with alleged link to those in power. There has been a rapid deterioration of law and order all over Bangladesh and a



lot of it is linked to politics in the country. Yet we seem to be concerned more with Islamic militancy and less about the slide in law and order that poses an equally great problem for Bangladesh.

The AL has no links to Islam based parties and thus has no baggage to carry to please such groups

as the BNP had to during 2001-2006, an opportunity the Islamic parties used to good measure. The AL has won a massive mandate from the people on an agenda of economic development where power generation, water distribution and overall economic development are their promises to the nation together

with holding the trial of the war criminals. To succeed on all these issues, a stable political environment is absolutely indispensable. It is unfortunate that they are now moving into areas that have potential of making politics volatile and unstable.

Our people are deeply sensitive

towards Islam. Giving wrong perceptions of Islam abroad also has the potential of harming Bangladesh. Millions of our expatriates live in the Middle East with nearly two million in Saudi Arabia. If these countries perceive that Islam is in danger in Bangladesh, the economic consequences will not be good for the country. Islamic political parties have their supporters in these countries and hence when we blame them for terrorism, we must have our facts absolutely correct and discuss these with our friends in the Middle East, take them on board and then proceed with the matter. Here our diplomacy has a great role to play. Before anyone runs to the media to score points with Islamic militancy, they must have their facts impeccably correct and then weigh it against the diplomatic considerations.

With the AL's massive election victory, the country has been given a great opportunity for economic and social development. The WB report should remind the government that there is a lot of serious research that needs to be done on the status of Islamic militancy in the country before going public over it. This government must save the country from the threats of Islamic militancy and at the same time it must save the image of Bangladesh.

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## Pakistan on the brink: Lessons for Bangladesh

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NEWS from Pakistan over the last few months kept getting worse. The threat posed by the Taliban and their Al-Qaeda sponsor have been growing everyday. Vast swath of northern territory in the Federally Administered Tribal Agency (FATA) as well as parts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) is virtually outside the control of the government. Militant leaders, each with his well-armed militias, have declared their own Emirates. The Taliban incursion into once-peaceful valley of Swat has been particularly brutal; they destroyed hundreds of schools, especially girls' schools. Banks and treasuries have been looted and people terrorized by arbitrary killing, whipping and other cruel punishment. All men have been forced to grow beard and women driven inside the Burqa. Pakistan government's policy of appeasement has

to disrupt vital gas supplies to the industrial bases in Sindh and Punjab. The sectarian violence between the Shias and Sunnis has become perennial. Some Sunni sects consider the Shias as Kafir (Infidels) and a legitimate target of attack; the Shias retaliate in the same fashion. Sectarian groups are active all across Pakistan attacking rival mosques, holy places or religious ceremonies. The Shia-Sunni divide is threatening the very fabric of Pakistan's nationhood. In Karachi, old rivalries between the Muhajirs and the Pashtuns are claiming lives once again.

Politics in Pakistan had been moribund with the power being exercised by privileged class of landowners, industrialists or tribal heads. Ordinary Pakistanis have little say in the affairs of the state. The military had always played a key role in the politics of Pakistan. It orchestrated a jihad in Indian controlled Kashmir and had been instrumental in creating the hype of an imminent Indian invasion. It thus secured for

the Pakistani experience and draw lessons to avoid similar pitfalls. Some of the lessons learnt are described below.

- Mixing religion with politics: Religion mixed with politics makes a dangerous cocktail. Although Mr. Jinnah's vision was a secular Muslim majority state, Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan, his successor, legislated in 1951 that Pakistan will be an ideological state based on Islam. This opened the Pandora's Box of endless feud on the role of Islam in Pakistan. The Ulemas argued that if Pakistan was to be an Islamic state then they were the rightful guardian and interpreter of its ideology. However, various schools of Ulemas could never agree on a common ideology and in course of time, the nation was divided on sectarian lines. Politicians always used Islam as means to achieve their objectives. "Islam is in danger" has been a slogan to divert the attention of the masses from crucial temporal issues. Islamist parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) or Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) have

remain fragile, mainly due to military intervention at regular intervals. Military's omnipresence meant a far greater than usual share of the national wealth going for the military. This, of course, came at the expense of other social sectors their needs remained unattended. The country became a militarized state, where vital state policies were decided by the military hierarchy without popular participation. In Indo-Pak War of 1965 and Kargil War in 1999, the military decided on national objectives bypassing the political organs of the state.

- Keep the intelligence agencies under check: The Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) in Pakistan had become virtually independent, beyond the control of the government. It started with the agency collaborating with CIA in fomenting anti-Soviet War in Afghanistan during the 1980s, then dubbed as Jihad. Billions of dollars in cash and weapons were funneled through ISI operatives. We all know how ISI first helped Mujahidin forces to gain control of Kabul, and few years later, organized, trained and equipped the Taliban to replace the Mujahedins. ISI had a key role in running the Jihad in Indian controlled Kashmir. While these covert activities went on, the nation was kept in the dark. ISI became a government inside a government.

- Reform education to curb extremism: Islamic militancy or the sectarianism that the Pakistani society is facing today is the result of years of radical teachings imparted in Pakistan not only in Madrassas, but in the mainstream schools as well. President Ziaul Haq, in his bid to Islamise the society, ordered revision of school text books. Thus, the students were taught that the non-believers are enemies of Islam and Jihad must be waged against them. Raising the spirit of Jihad became an objective of education. Even after the demise of Zia, the text books remained unchanged. Thus, a generation of youth got indoctrinated in an extreme and exclusive version of Islam. Militancy was only one step beyond. Thousands of Madrassas, financed by CIA and ME states, sprouted all over the country during the Anti-Soviet War in the 1980s. These became the recruiting centres of the Mujahedins and Taliban. Former President Pervez Musharraf's effort to register the Madrassas and reform their syllabus came to a naught. The Madrassas refused to accept governmental supervision despite various

financial enticement offered by the government. If the radicalization of the Pakistani youth is to be reversed, the education system must be revised to promote liberal version of Islam, which indeed was the traditional Islam in Pakistan.

- Strengthen democracy and ensure social justice: Pakistan could not institutionalize democracy, nor could it ensure social justice to its citizens. While Zamindari (Feudalism) system was abolished in the then East Pakistan in 1948, it still prevails in Pakistan. Landlords, controlling the national politics, would not allow any meaningful land reforms. Pakistani government kept alive the Tribal Sardari system in the FATA that was essentially colonial, backward and corrupt. People there had seen nothing better than arbitrary justice. There has been significant economic development in Pakistan, but the rich-poor and urban-rural divide widened. Frontational politics, dynastic leadership, corrupt bureaucracy have so disenchanted the people that they seem to have lost faith in the state itself. Poor governance is one of the most important reasons why Pakistan today is sliding into chaos and anarchy.

It would be apparent that the socio-political development in Pakistan and Bangladesh has much in common. The principle of secularism was abandoned in 1975 in Bangladesh and religion made deep inroads into politics. Like Pakistan, the Islamist parties do not attract votes, yet politicians of all hue court and covet them. Lack of democratic control of the military and the intelligence agencies are evident in Bangladesh. At present we are witnessing the unfolding of a covert gunrunning operation by an intelligence agency that could have seriously jeopardized national security and embarrass the government.

As far as the education system is concerned we are in no better shape. The nation is burdened with at least four types of education streams. Confrontational politics, dynastic leadership, poor governance, growing rich-poor divide are all common factors between Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, our democratic heritage, as well as liberal cultural traditions is deep rooted in the Bengali psyche. There lies our hope for the future. The troubles in Pakistan demand that we re-evaluate our overall national strategy to ensure a prosperous and peaceful future.

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### Obama's Pak-Afghan strategy

The US Army general in charge of training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) has described the unveiling of President Barack Obama's new Afpak strategy in March as a potential "tipping point" in US and Nato efforts in Afghanistan.

Major General Richard Formica, the commander of the Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan (CSTC-A), said at CSTC-A's Kabul headquarters that the additional resources outlined by Obama promised to end the chronic under-resourcing of both civil and military projects.

"In Iraq in 2004, if we needed something, we got it," said Gen Formica. "Up until this point in Afghanistan we figured out how to get along without it. That's changing." He said that Obama's strategic review "validated the current programme we're on" and that the decision to send 4,000 US trainers as well as frontline troops was "a demonstrable and sustainable commitment to the development of the Afghan security forces."

Those security forces would eventually need to number "roughly double" the combined 216,000 soldiers and police currently mandated, Gen Formica added; he therefore welcomed the "room for growth" he thought the White House review allowed.

The development of the ANA was "on track," he said, with 15,700 officers and NCOs currently in training and the Kabul Military Training Centre (KMTC), the ANA's main training facility, graduating between 1,100 and 1,200 new soldiers every fortnight from the ten-week Basic Warrior Training course.

Among a range of moves outlined by CSTC-A officials aimed at improving ANA training is a USD90 million programme to upgrade the facilities at KMTC, the forthcoming establishment of a new combat service support school at the centre and the inauguration of a sergeant major programme to complement KMTC's already extensive NCO programme. Adding to the existing ANA facilities in Kabul, Heart and Mazar-e Sharif, Basic Warrior Training being offered in the eastern province of Khowst to improve accessibility.

Gen Formica accepted that the ANP was "further behind" and that there had been "no programme growth until recently." He said that CSTC-A's priority was now to "sustain momentum on the army while adding focus to the police." A new pay structure ensuring parity between the ANA and the ANP, the basic salary for both services is now USD 120 per month and the introduction of a merit-based promotion system and of drug-testing for all police officers are among the measures that CSTC-A is employing to raise standards.

### India launches border-control satellite

India successfully launched its first all-weather Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) built imaging satellite on 20 April, which will enable it to closely monitor its restive and porous borders with its neighbours.

The 300 kg Radar Imaging Satellite-2 (RISAT-2), equipped with a high-resolution synthetic aperture radar (SAR), was launched from the space centre at Sriharikota in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh aboard the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO)-developed polar satellite launch vehicle (PSLV) C12 rocket.

"This is the first time we are working in the microwave band. With this, the satellite can see through clouds and identify objects on the ground very precisely," said ISRO chairman Madhvan Nair. According to Nair, RISAT-2 has been positioned at a forty-one degree inclination, enabling it to revisit a specific area at frequent intervals.

Nair declined to disclose the price paid to IAI for the RISAT-2, but said: "Normally a remote sensing satellite weighing one ton would cost around USD 16 million. This spacecraft is much smaller."

RISAT-2, placed in orbit 550 km above the Earth nineteen minutes after lift-off, will allow India's military and security agencies to effectively monitor the frontiers.

India claims Pakistan infiltrates Islamic insurgents across the disputed line of control in the northern Jammu and Kashmir province to fuel the two-decade-old insurgency there: a claim Islamabad has grudgingly conceded in the past.

The attack on India's capital, Mumbai, last November by ten Pakistan-based terrorists in which some 170 people died, along with increased incursions into Kashmir this year, hastened plans to launch the imaging satellite, officials said.

India's military also accuses China's People's Liberation Army of frequently infringing the unresolved frontier over which the two countries fought a war in 1962.

While Indian scientists played down Israel's involvement in providing the satellite and its obvious military applications, official sources conceded that RISAT-2 was similar to the Israeli TecSAR spy satellite the ISRO placed in orbit in January 2008 in a classified launch to which access was prohibited at Tel Aviv's request.

Indian security sources said TecSAR augmented Israel's intelligence-gathering capabilities providing twenty-four hour high resolution SAR imagery in all weather conditions at an affordable cost.

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only emboldened the militants. Since the joint declaration by President Obama, Zardari and Hamid Karzai on 5 May '09, a renewed offensive started in Swat. But how long the steam will last is a big question. The situation is particularly perilous in view of the nuclear weapons in Pakistan's possession. The West is worried about the disposal of the nuclear weapons if the militants come to power in Islamabad or a right wing coup takes place.

There are troubles elsewhere in Pakistan too. Much of Baluchistan is in the grip of an insurgency that goes back to the partition in 1947. The Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) regularly conducts operations

itself a large chunk of the national budget. The Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan Military's intelligence service, acted as the midwife at the birth of the Taliban in the 1990s; the same Taliban are now waging a war against the state.

Events in Pakistan influence Bangladesh in many ways. Our geographic proximity and historic ties, our membership of SAARC and our common interest in many geo-strategic issues make it imperative for us to keep a close watch on the events in Pakistan. After Pakistan, could Bangladesh be the next Islamist battleground? It is a question that cannot be easily shrugged off. It is, therefore, important for us to learn from

always been patronised by the major political parties. Radicalization of Islam, sectarian divide and the militancy in Pakistan owe it to the cardinal sin "mixing religion with politics."

- Keep military out of politics: The democratic principle of keeping military out of politics had been violated repeatedly in Pakistan. While military had intervened in the name of saving the state from crisis, in the end, every military intervention only deepened and exacerbated the crisis. Once again, as Pakistan is facing a grave national crisis, there is the whisper of a military takeover that would lead Pakistan to yet graver crisis. Democratic institutions in Pakistan continue to