

South Asian Task force against terrorism

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South Asia has been a victim of mindless terrorism, India and Bangladesh included. Over the six years, Bangladesh saw certain patterns of terrorism in terms of lethality, clarity of political goals of the terrorists and of their motivation and commitment.

In August 2004 current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself narrowly escaped death in a grenade attack on a rally in Dhaka, in which 23 leaders and workers of her Awami League were killed and over 150 were wounded.

The Mumbai attacks on 26th November surpassed all other attacks in their intensity, scale, coordination and execution. A sense of insecurity in the region has been created by the Mumbai attacks because it may spill over in any country in South Asia including Bangladesh.

On 28th January, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina says she plans to push to set up a South Asia Task Force to combat the growing menace of terrorism in the region.

"I have already instructed the authorities concerned (in Bangladesh) to take the initiative to form the South Asian Anti-terrorist Task Force which will create scope for tracing militants and put them on trial," Hasina told parliament on 28th January.

The Prime Minister added "Terrorists have no political, geographical or religious identity. Anyone killing people in the name of Islam (Muslim religion) are enemies of our faith."

Terrorist cells in Bangladesh:

A new variety of terrorism, with Islamic Charter, based on orthodox and intolerant interpretation of puritanical Islam has been operating in Bangladesh since 1998. The most prominent of these groups include Jamaatul Mujahideen (JMB), now banned, Harkut-ul-Jehad al-Islami (HUJI), Hizbut-ut-Tahrir and Hibz-ul-Mujahidin.

The largest of all is the JMB with an estimated 100,000 members. Although in March 30, 2007, six top militants of the JMB, including its 'supreme commander' Maulana Abdur Rahman and second-in-command, Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai were executed in Bangladesh, sleeping cells of JMB exist.

Bangladesh-India cooperation:

Against the background, the South Asian Task force on terrorism is appropriate because terrorism can not be fought by a single state. The war on terrorism is a shadowy war or a war of "hide and seek". They are non-state actors that are elusive. The principal problem of terrorism is that they have a global reach, estimated to be in 60 countries. The terrorists are groups, without countries or uniforms and may lie low for years before they act.

If all countries do not agree to the concept, Bangladesh and India may jointly set up the task force.

Combating terrorism has to be conducted through two means:

- (a) anti-terrorism measures
- (b) counter-terrorism measures

The first relates to defensive measures and the second deals with offensive measures.

Defensive measures are those that reduce vulnerability of individuals and property from terrorist attacks, while counter terrorism involves those offensive measures taken to prevent, pursue and respond to terrorism.

The general strategy of terrorism is to prevent, protect, pursue and respond to terrorist acts. It may consist of three components: short term, mid-term and long term.

The strategy includes prevention of new recruits to terrorist cell, protect potential targets, pursue and investigate the existing network. Finally improve the capability to respond to terrorist acts.

How to proceed:

- (i) Investigation of types of terrorist groups in Bangladesh and India
- (ii) Capacity building of law enforcing and intelligence agencies
- (iii) Coordination and joint meetings of agencies of both countries
- (iv) Multi motivational faceted campaign in the country
- (v) Social and educational reforms to halt spread of terrorism
- (vi) Involvement of local neighbourhoods for intelligence gathering and detection of terrorist cells
- (vii) Curbing illegal smuggling of arms, light weapons and explosives in the country
- (viii) Curbing drug-trafficking, container security at ports and strict vigilance of unloading of goods
- (ix) Effective use of anti-money laundering law to identify and close the source of funds
- (x) Effective border management and immigration control in cross-border terrorism by means of modern technological equipment
- (xi) Intelligence sharing
- (xii) Role of media in combating terrorism

The Hasina government must not be perceived as “pro-India” to people and the opposition parties in the country. To counter this perception, , India has to come up first with fair proposals to resolve some high-profile bilateral disputes, such as, maritime boundary, land boundary treaty implementation including the exchange of enclaves, sharing of waters of common rivers and reducing trade deficit.

If this is done, it will be much easier for the Hasina government to carry people with her in strengthening relations with India in all sectors. Bangladesh is happy that India is emerging a

world power but India has to deal with respect and sensitivity of a small neighbour, such as Bangladesh.
