

Role of SAARC for Countering Terrorism in South Asia

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Abstract

Terrorism poses a serious threat to security of any region and South Asia has become one of the most dangerous regions of world due to terrorist activities. Since the inception of SAARC in 1985, concerns over terrorism have been showed and realization for collective regional mechanism is prominently highlighted in its agenda as the terrorism is threatening political stability and mutual understanding in the region. Owing to increased threats, terrorism was high on agenda during the 3rd summit of SAARC at Kathmandu in 1987. All the seven members signed ‘SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and were agreed to take effective measures. The Convention warned the member countries against this menace and its dangerous effects towards regional security. In 1988, the convention came into force but did not control the terrorist activities by taking any effective measure. Several other initiatives have also been taken from this forum but the desired results are not achieved. The paper is to examine the counterterrorism initiatives taken by this forum and to explore impediments blocking the path of cooperation for an effective and joint strategy as well as suggestions for countering terrorism and securing regional peace and stability.

Key words: convention, protocol, terrorism, security threat, peace, stability, mistrust, extremism.

Introduction

Terrorism poses a serious threat to peace and prosperity, stability and security, coordination and cooperation, fraternity and friendship among the nations. It also harms the political stability of the region, flow of trade among the nations, mutual understanding for dealing bilateral issues and cooperation to adopt common agenda for economic prosperity of the people. The nature of threats and vulnerabilities created by terrorism is a serious issue, which is jeopardizing

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regional peace. Suicide bombing, target killing and political assassinations are common in the region and continuing scourge of terrorism is a threat to life, liberty, economy and religious pluralism. Bomb blasts on public and religious places and religious festivities are shaking the region and shocking the international community. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a forum of seven countries India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives was established in Dhaka (8 December 1985) to bring closer the regional actors. In 2007, Afghanistan joined this forum during the 14th summit. The idea of SAARC was first motivated by President Zia-ur-Rahman of Bangladesh in 1980. Its aim was to build cooperation among the countries of South Asia. To him, regional cooperation was required for peace keeping and if it was executed in good faith by all the regional actors that could bring economic cooperation and progress reducing the political dividends (Rai, 1989: 882). Meanwhile, domestic power structure of Bangladesh overthrew Zia-ur-Rehman in a coup while Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was also assassinated. However, the first summit held in Dhaka at fixed time in 1985 and leaders of all the seven countries attended the summit for informal consultation at the regional level.

Definition of Terrorism

Terrorism is commonly defined as an unlawful activity or illegal use of force and violence against innocent people and their possession for achieving some political gains. An all acceptable definition of terrorism is yet to be adopted by the United Nations (UN). Even since the hijacking of first commercial airliner by Palestinian leader Yasser Arfat, the UN has not been able to differentiate between a freedom fighter and terrorist and no consensus has been developed to define the act and nature of terrorism and its suitable solution (Pandey, 2010: 42). A consensus on definition is difficult because of individual interpretation and self-oriented explanations of different countries. On 17 March 2005, the UN panel defined terrorism as an act:

“intended to cause death or serious physical harm to civilian or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.”

Another definition was given by UN Resolution 49/60 entitled ‘Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism’ on 9 December 1994. It contained a provision explaining terrorism as

“criminal act intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or a particular person for political purpose, are in any circumstances unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical,

ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them” (Comras, 2005).

Efforts of SAARC Summits for Counterterrorism

Since SAARC’s creation, need for collective regional effort was prominently highlighted in the SAARC agenda of counterterrorism. It was a good omen. Terrorism was at high priority in the 3rd summit of SAARC held at Kathmandu in 1987 owing to events of terrorism in Sri Lanka. All the seven countries signed the ‘SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism.’ The members committed to

“take effective measures to ensure that perpetrators of terroristic acts do not escape prosecution and punishment by providing for their extradition or prosecution to this end.” The Convention assumed about the members that they were “aware of the danger posed by the spread of terrorism and its harmful effects on peace, cooperation, friendship and good neighbourly relations, which could also jeopardize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.”

During this session, the heads of state/government condemned all acts, methods and practices of terrorism as criminal and showed their apprehensions for future security and peace (SAARC Regional Convention...1987). The members signed the Convention on 4th November, which came into force on 22 August 1988 after ratification by all members. It also erected strong consensus for cooperation to counterterrorism (Countering terrorism...2010). Basically, the activities of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka were the main reason of pushing and motivating SAARC members to pass the Convention. Despite all this, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi could not survive and fell victim to terrorism as LTTE killed him on 21 May 1988. LTTE accepted responsibility of assassination alleging India for not proposing a proper political solution (Times of India, 2006, June 28).

This Convention provides a regional approach as Article 8th contains:

“Contracting States shall cooperate among themselves, to the extent permitted by their national laws, through consultations between appropriate agencies, exchange of information, intelligence and expertise and such other cooperative measures as may be appropriate, with a view to preventing terroristic activities through precautionary measures” (SAARC Regional Convention, 1987).

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This Convention led to the formation of ‘SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD)’ at Colombo in 1990 to adopt a mechanism for implementation of the Convention. The Desk was “to collect, analyze, and disseminate information about the terrorist tactics and strategies and methods” (Lama, 2006). A work shop was held in February 2007 at New Delhi to strengthen the Desk but it failed in bringing any change (Banergee, 2010: 46, 69). The Desk is victim of political polarization, financial constraints and indifference of member states and is not capable to adopt a collective mechanism for analyzing information about the terrorist incidents, tactics, plans, strategies and methods. Despite all these strategies and numerous commitments to counterterrorism at the regional level, the Convention remained in written only and no solid or practical step was taken for its implementation.

In the aftermath of terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the UN passed series of resolutions that set the international communities’ commitment to counter the threat. Following the UN, the SAARC gave priority to this issue during the eleventh Summit and observed global initiatives for combating terrorism and eliminating criminal activities. During 28th session held at Kathmandu (19-20 August 2002), SAARC Standing Committee recommended that ‘Legal Advisers of SAARC Member States’ would prepare a draft of ‘Additional Protocol to ‘SAARC Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism’ (SAARC Regional...2010). The need of the hour was to update the Convention according to international scenario. The Protocol became the part of Convention after its creation. The committee also recommended a ministerial level meeting for convening. The 23rd session of SAARC Council of Ministers (Kathmandu, 21-22 August, 2002) endorsed the Standing Committee’s recommendations to mandate the ‘Senior Officials’ assisted by Legal Experts of SAARC Member States to prepare an Additional Protocol. The Council of Ministers carefully drafted the agenda through consultation of all SAARC members. Following this mandate, the Senior Officials assisted by Legal Experts met in Colombo (27-29 August 2003) to prepare the draft of Additional Protocol (Council of Ministers, 2003).

The 12th SAARC Summit held in Islamabad on 4-6 January 2004. On this occasion, Council of Ministers signed the Additional Protocol to SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. Its purpose was to strengthen the Convention, particularly “criminalizing the provision, collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts and taking further measures to prevent and suppress financing of such acts.” Additional Protocol was signed in 2002 but came into force on 12th January 2006 after ratification by all members (Countering terrorism...2010). SAARC members showed their commitment to follow necessary measures for implementation of Protocol. The ratification of Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters has been pending since its signing in August 2008, and yet has come into force (Ibid).

Additional Protocol encouraged the member states to enforce strategies for monitoring and detecting terrorists’ movements with ceasing their funds across the national borders through mutual cooperation. It also encouraged the exchange of

information for improving immigration and custom control regulations across the region. In the 12th summit, the members reiterated their support to UN Resolution 1373. They also assured their determination to increase collective efforts as well as preventive measures for suppression of terrorism (Ashraf, 2004).

Since the formation of SAARC in 1985, there have been a total of sixteen summits. In these summits, heads of state/government made important declarations and statements but terrorist attacks of 9/11 became a catalyst to this platform. During the 12th and 13th summits, extreme emphasis was laid upon deeper cooperation among the members to counterterrorism. Since the enforcement of Additional Protocol in 2006, the summit has been passing resolutions to counter terrorism. The 14th summit was conducted in New Delhi on 3-4 April in 2007. The heads of state/government showed their consent to work on the modalities to implement the provisions of Conventions for combating terrorism, illegal trade of drugs and psychotropic substances, human trafficking particularly women and children and other transnational crimes. The summit also condemned all types and manifestations of the terrorist violence and targeted killings of civilian population. All these decisions are sufficient evidence to show the consensus of the regional nations and their concern to terrorism (Ministry of External..., 2007).

The 15th summit (August 2-3, 2008) was hosted in Colombo. It pledged to fight against terrorism as its priority. A legal pact to combat terrorism was signed in the summit. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse commented,

“there was clear recognition that terrorism has become a great menace throughout the world, including our region, South Asia cannot progress unless there is stability and security throughout the region” (Mukherjee, 2008, August 4).

However, Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai started the blame-game, which sidelined the real issue as cooperation of all members was required. The final declaration stressed to increase cooperation for uplifting of the region and asked the leaders to strengthen their commitment to international conventions on the theme “legal regime against terrorism” as well as already signed SAARC-specific protocols (Terrorism and SAARC, 2010, November 25).

The Sixteenth Summit held in Thimphu (Bhutan) on 28-29 April 2010. The heads of state/government reiterated their concerns for increasing and continuing threats of terrorism to regional stability and strongly condemned all forms and manifestations of terrorism. They said,

“The linkages between the terrorism, illegal trafficking in drugs and psychotropic substance, illegal trafficking of persons and firearms all continue to remain a matter of serious concern.”

They emphasized that these issues require a committed and comprehensive approach. They stressed on the need of regional cooperation to combat ‘terrorism and transnational organized crimes.’ Additionally, they insisted on implementation

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of ‘Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, Additional Protocol and Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Recognizing the importance of the proposed ‘UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism,’ the participants of the summit observed the development of the recent rounds of negotiations and stressed for an early result of the Convention. The members showed their will to implement the suggested steps of the Fifteenth SAARC Summit of Colombo including the SAARC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters. They reiterated their commitment to the SAARC and terrorism. It was decided to establish a ‘High-Level Group of Eminent Experts’ aiming to review and make proposals for an effective anti-terrorism mechanisms and cooperation in this direction (Pakistan Times, 2010, September 12).

Despite adopting and formulating a number of strategies and mechanisms on bilateral/ multilateral levels, SAARC Summit, the highest authority of the forum, has not been able to evolve a common and comprehensive approach to counterterrorism.

SAARC Council of Ministers

This is second-in authority after the Summit. Comprising on foreign ministers of SAARC countries, the council is responsible for multiple affairs. It meets twice a year and may also call meetings for extraordinary situation (Siddiqi, 2006: 4). The council has conducted 32 meetings until April 2010. The council adopted ‘Declaration on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism’ during its 31st session held at Colombo on 28 February 2009. The council suggested an integrated border management mechanism. A ‘High-Level Group of Eminent Experts’ was established in this ministerial meeting aiming to review and prepare proposals for empowering SAARC anti-terrorism agenda. The Declaration stated,

“We reiterate our commitment to take steps, to share expertise and information about terrorists, their movements, their support, facilities and their weapons, bearing in mind in particular, the threats posed to maritime and coastal security and to share information regarding the investigation and prosecution of terrorist acts” (SAARC Ministerial Declaration...2009, February).

The next meeting of the Council of Ministers held in April 2010 at Thimphu (Bhutan). Addressing the meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna said,

“The South Asian region is particularly afflicted by this menace. The time has come for us to rally against the forces of terrorism that seek to divide and weaken our societies” (India asks SAARC...2010, April 27).

He proposed to follow 'UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.' He also insisted to ratify other regional instruments to combat this menace collectively. In two-day meeting, terrorism remained high on agenda. But situation is not much optimistic and results and effects have not yet cleared.

Meeting of SAARC Ministers of Interior/Home

This meeting is another mechanism, which is recently introduced by the SAARC to combat terrorism in the region through cooperative and collective measures. After adoption of Additional Protocol, the first meeting of SAARC Ministers of Interior/Home was held at Dhaka on 11 May, 2006 and the second was in New Delhi on 25 October 2007, which examined the development towards the Convention and Additional Protocol. Third meeting was conducted in Islamabad from 23-26 June 2010. In this meeting, Indian Home Minister Chidambaram was the first senior level official to visit Pakistan since the Mumbai terrorist attacks (November 2008). In a separate meeting, the two counterparts discussed the prospects of cooperation on counter-terrorism between India and Pakistan. Apart from other issues, counterterrorism strategies were the focus of the discussion. The meeting passed several resolutions for regional cooperation against terrorism and smuggling. Pakistan suggested for creation of an institution similar to Interpol (Taking terrorism..., 2010, June 26). India stressed for effective multilateral cooperation to tackle terrorism, calling it 'biggest challenge to the region.' But there was no agreement on proposal of extradition treaty despite strong support by India. The same was fate of the proposal made by Bangladesh to set up a SAARC Anti-Terrorism Task Force. The meeting stressed to increase police cooperation and intelligence sharing as well as other means to combat terrorism. SAARC members also exchanged lists of banned organizations and Pakistan's list had the names of 21 organizations, which were banned by Pakistan (The Express Tribune, 2010, June 27).

During this meeting, Mumbai attacks also came under discussion and Chidambaram admitted that according to his information seven people were prosecuted in the case. He added,

"How far that prosecution has proceeded, it is for the Pakistan Government to say. I understand that the trial that was scheduled today [26 June] has been adjourned by a week. We think that more people may be behind the 26/11 attack and more people should be prosecuted. That point has been made to the Pakistan Government and as I said I wish to remain positive on the outcome of the meeting with Mr. Rehman Malik, we are trying to pick the threads again" (SAARC Members...2010).

On 26 June, 2010, the last day of the meeting, the ministers unanimously issued a statement condemning terrorism in all its forms showing their

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commitment to join hands to fight this global threat (The Nation, 2010, June 27). The declaration “reiterated to contribute to the efforts in the UN General Assembly for early adoption of the UN Draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism” (Adopted Islamabad...2010, June 26).

The fourth meeting of SAARC Ministers of Interior/Home was held at Thimphu (Bhutan) on 23 July, 2011. Interior Minister of Pakistan Rehman Malik presided over the conference and stressed the need for cooperation and concrete steps to combat terrorism and money-laundering. He proposed to establish SAARC-Pole on the pattern of Inter pole and emphasized the need of harmony and creation of a SAARC commission for this objective. He also called for the formation of a joint task force to control the acts of piracy in the Indian Ocean. Sharing information, he told that the terrorists made 7485 bomb explosion in Pakistan during the last decade, out of which 3800 were suicide bombings while war on terror took 35,000 lives in the country. He appreciated King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia for his philosophy of interfaith harmony and suggested to follow it. He also shared the forum that 31 organizations were banned by Pakistan (Malik proposes SAARC body, Dawn, 2011, July 24). Chidambaram called South Asia as the most insecure region of the world where lives of people were not secured. He declared that no country can free itself of responsibility regarding terrorist activities from its land by alleging the non-state actors. SAARC countries should use their resources with collective measures to this direction (The Daily Jang (Lahore), 2011, July 24).

Despite passing a quarter of century, the SAARC is still failed to follow a common counter-terrorism approach. Different proposals like establishment of SAARC Police and SAARC Anti-Terrorism Task Force have not received consensus from the members. The pace of progress is very slow on this issue. Terrorism is a political issue with contradicting and conflicting national and regional perspectives. Every member is ready to cooperate with others but with a specific interpretation of terrorism. However, the members are agreed to eliminate this menace jointly and the declaration issued in Islamabad at the end of the Interior minister’s conference had the same views(Daily Times, 2010, July 7). This indicates that cooperation among the SAARC nations is closely linked to the domestic political dynamics of SAARC countries and regional environment in which they operate as sovereign entities.

Reasons of Non-Cooperation on Different Strategies

Analyzing the present situation of South Asia, it is observed that little has been achieved and no progress has been made despite passing two decades of signing the Convention. There is not a single country in the region that has been spared by terrorist attacks but mutual coordinated acts, intelligence-sharing and meaningful cooperation are nowhere or work in rare cases only. This position is due to major policy lacunae, which requires to be revised. Apart from this, there are several

other factors that characterized the relations and do not augur the mutual steps for countering terrorism.

First, there is general practice among SAARC countries to **accuse the intelligence agencies** of each other calling them mastermind of terrorist attacks within their borders. In such a position, cooperation is a far cry and intelligence sharing or information regarding terrorist activities is out of questions. None of the provisions of the Convention or Protocol can be properly implemented in conflicting and contradicting situation. Therefore, not a single terrorist has been arrested under the Convention. On the other hand magnitude of the attacks and bombing has been intensified after events of 9/11. The Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad and the Mumbai attacks (2008) are recent examples of brutal tales of horror.

Second, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the region has become a **battlefield for global terrorism**, led by Al-Qaeda and other militant groups. The biggest victims are the countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are numerous regional groups, which are working in collaboration with terrorist organizations. The Taliban in both countries are engaged in terrorist activities. In Bangladesh, Harkat-ul-Jehad-al-Islami (HUJI-B) and Jama'atul-Mujahida Bangladesh (JMB) are major militant groups. These groups shocked the whole nation on 17 August 2005 blasting 527 time-bombs in 63 districts within 30 minutes, MunShiganj was spared only. Bangladeshi groups had links with regional parties and were inspired by Osama bin Laden and got support from Al-Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban regime for their activities. About 176 people have been killed including journalist, lawyers, justices and political leaders since 1999 because of militant attacks in Bangladesh (Muniruzzaman, 2010: 8).

Third, there are numerous **non-state actors and terrorist organizations** working in every state and causing huge damage to lives and property. From Afghanistan to Sri Lanka, these groups are engaged in terrorist activities. Religious militancy is also showing signs of life despite continuous crackdowns on its terrorist infrastructure. It has been reported that many of the outlawed terrorist groups have been trying to regroup or reorganize under the new names. These groups also try to forge an alliance with other likeminded groups. It is reported that this strategy is being adopted in Bangladesh, as many outlawed parties have been attempting to reorganize (Ibid: 5). Religious militancy accompanied by radicalism is dangerous for the stability of the region, which just increase violence through radical organizations.

Fourth is **advance technology and firearms with ammunition**, which are easily in access of terrorist groups. Law enforcing agencies do not keep record of illegal arms for any accountability or legal purpose. Terrorist organizations are calibrating more lethal attacks in presence of these arms than their previous record. Acts of terrorism, brutal killing, violence and lawlessness are the outcome of illegal arms and ammunition. Some quarters are expressing fear that non-state actors may get access to nuclear weapons or materials as they are attempting to get

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hold of chemical and biological weapons outside the region. All South Asian nations are not well-equipped to secure the civilian populations from devastating effects of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in case of their use by the terrorists.

Fifth, terrorism in South Asia has widened the **gulf between the communities** through its sharp manipulation. For instance, the terrorist attacks in India have sharpened the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims as it provided ground for alleging each other for conducting terrorist activities. In Pakistan, immense hostility is found between the Shias and the Sunnis and same is position in Afghanistan. While in Sri Lanka, attacks have created a significant division between the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

Sixth is **political polarization**, which is affecting almost all sections of population in SAARC countries. The law enforcing agencies are being misused by local leaders using them to materialize their narrow objectives. Terrorist are carrying out atrocities for political gains without being checked by law-enforcing agencies. These elements are active in the area. In Nepal, Young Communist League (YCL), a leftist group, is said to be engaged in terrorizing and even killing the cadres of other political parties. The communists (Maoist) are in minority and are well-aware that they are the single party in the house while other parties with their old and conservative leaders have no ability to challenge them either in the streets or parliament. Maoist government wanted to stop promotion of army generals and personal, however, the army forced it to resign (Pandey, 2010:32-33, 36). This all is the result of political use of religion, a dys-functional system of education and socio-economic backwardness of the countries.

Seventh is **economic disparity**. The SAARC covers 21 per cent of the world's total population and 3-5 per cent of area but it accounts for only 0.25 per cent of the world's Gross National Product (Sharma, 2001). However, economic disparity persists and a small number of upper economic classes rule the majority. The present economic trend is widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The group of have-nots is highly susceptible to any political, ideological and religious motivation. A part of this group ultimately resorts to criminal and terrorist activities. The economic injustice generally give rise to terrorist activities. Student politics is also aimed to gain economic benefits and those who lost the right of education due to political activities, sometimes become part of terrorist activities for monetary gains. An influx of weapon in the campus is creating violence, terrorism and hooliganism in educational institutions.

Eighth is the **lack of mutual trust**, which is blocking the path of a common strategy among South Asian nations. This phenomenon generally blocks regional as well as sub-regional cooperation. One country's terrorist is seldom seen through the same prism into other country and this double standard has become an epidemic for the SARRC (Khosla, 2002: 316).

Finally, the **rivalries among the states** are the major cause of terrorism. The region has long been haunted by the hostilities between the most powerful members; India and Pakistan. During the last six decades, mutual disputes have

destroyed their relations bringing them to the wars in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999. Once again they were at brink of war in 2001-02. This time military confrontation was due to the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. India blamed Pakistan of this attack. Recently another terrorist attack was witnessed in Mumbai on November 2008. There have been several other instances of terrorist attacks in India over the last decade, which have distorted the relations and brought them to a point of suspending all types of diplomatic ties. India blames Pakistan for all such activities and in return, same practice is used by Pakistani intelligence agencies.

In the changing global situation, India alleges Pakistan-based radical groups for harbouring terrorist acts in its territory. Among these groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is blamed for the most of attacks in urban India. The attacks at Mumbai, Jaipur and Hyderabad are also assumed to be supported by the LeT (Chandran, 2010: 63). In 1990, HizbulMujahideen was labeled as the primary militant group along with the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Lashkar-e-Taiba. But Jaish is no more active and Hisb is fading but Lashkar is taken as the major active 'terrorist group' (Guihong, 2005). In Indian view, LeT has the ability to carry out attacks on all major towns of India due to its sleeper cells in different cities of India (Chandran, 2010: 62). It is alleged that attacks on Ragwnath temple, State Assembly in Srinager, Indian Parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008 were made by this group (Ibid: 63). Political relations and atmosphere play a major role in increasing terrorism. Several intelligence agencies and various non-state actors are assisting 'terrorist groups' in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir (Times of India, 2008, December 12).

Terrorism was a serious issue between India and Bangladesh as militant groups from Assam and Nagaland took refuge in Bangladesh. India still calls Bangladesh as a haven for militant groups and a civil war in Sri Lanka also drags the neighboring countries (Mukherjee, 2008, August 4). There are instances, in which the neighbors themselves are incapable of pursuing any action to control the growth of radical groups that are inimical to another state. Bhutan and Bangladesh face a serious problem of governance in certain parts of border areas adjacent to India.

Required Strategies for SAARC to Counterterrorism

SAARC's record for addressing scourge of terrorism is not excellent. But it has the capacity to deter this menace through joint strategies. The members need to abandon double standards in dealing terrorist of other states. In contrast, they should make efforts for curtailing trans-border movement of these elements by sharing information. However, there are several areas where cooperation can bring better results.

First is **sharing expertise and exchange of information** among member states about the terrorists' movements, facilities, funding, training and weaponry.

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The maritime and coastal security requires exchange of information and improvement in existing immigration laws as well as joint patrolling. Customs' control measures are also essential for detecting and controlling the international movements of terrorists and their perpetrators. To control materials intended to launch terrorism, an integrated border management mechanism is essential. Today, most crime and terrorist-related threats use the sea as an attractive route for transit and communication. However, it is imperative that the SAARC has started understanding for patrolling.

Second is to build a **security mechanism** to deal terrorism. In this regard, SAARC can learn from the experiences of other regional organizations e.g. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for their strategies. SAARC charter excludes contentious and bilateral issues from formal deliberation but provides opportunities of having informal consultation as the way of promoting mutual understanding and confidence building measures (Siddiqi, 2006).

Third is formation of **regional counterterrorism center** for joint ventures of experts from SAARC countries. This forum would offer professional guidance and secretarial support to all governments for monitoring and implementing the proposals in letter and spirit. The legislation on counterterrorism needs uniformity to facilitate extradition and other provisions. The center can work on the pattern of Interpol to share information as Pakistan proposed in the recent meeting of Interior/Home ministers in Islamabad (Dawn, 2010, June 27).

Fourth is the use of **diplomatic, economic, military, financial and intelligent** sources to eliminate terrorism. SAARC countries need to follow zero-tolerance policy for terrorist activity within their borders showing tolerance in mutual matters. They need to avoid blaming each other for harboring terrorists. It is unrealistic to expect a tectonic shift in the current *modus operandi*. However, within the existing parameters of interstate equation, certain measure can be taken.

Fifth is the use of a **multi-pronged strategy** as no single solution fits to all situations. Some of the armed insurgencies of the region are more than half a century old, therefore different and suitable strategies are required to address them. The SAARC needs to be at forefront in this battle. With the help of intelligence sharing, ceasing terrorist funding, curbing radical elements and extraditing criminals, the situation can be improved (Dipankar, 2010: 52).

Sixth is, **extradition treaties** among SAARC countries. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have not signed extradition treaties with each other while they exchange criminals with other countries as they have signed more extradition treaties with non-SAARC countries. In absence of extradition treaties, countries have to find alternative route to address thorny issue rather than locating missing links. After Mumbai attacks, instead of demanding extradition of LeT leadership, India has to look for other choices including DNA sample of the prime accused Ajmal Kasab's family to ascertain his nationality and origin (Ibid: 71-72). In absence of extradition treaties, the leadership must ensure that demands are legally

tenable not rhetoric only. SAARC members must pursue investigation process making it scientific and fool-proof with creation of an effective legal process.

Finally, **SAARC charter** requires to be amended. At the time of its creation, a provision was included that contentions and bilateral issues would be kept away from this forum. This was made due to controversies among the states. It was logical in the beginning but it is unjustified in changing situation as the threat of terrorism is equally damaging the security of all SAARC nations. The organization included Afghanistan even the charter stipulates the seven members and its emblem still highlights the SAARC as an organization of seven states. The status of observer was not envisioned in the charter but the organization conferred observer status to many countries including United States, South Korea, European Union, Iran, China, Australia and Japan. However, Charter needs to be flexible and reexamination of existing conventions and protocols is essential for their validity and effectiveness. The SAARC is already lowering and lifting trade barriers, custom duties, and visa-free regimes by increasing air, road and rail links leading to an economic union but counterterrorism strategies require further development.

Conclusion

The SAARC has not a distinguished record on addressing the scourge of terrorism but it succeeded in bringing all members states on one platform despite their decades-long rivalries. It has made all members view terrorism with deep concerns and to follow a joint strategy. They are being pursued to abandon double standards for interpretation of terrorism. The forum also urged them to control trans-border movements of terrorists by sharing information. A number of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms have been working to increase cooperation of international community to counterterrorism. But the SAARC is still far away from evolving a common counter-terrorism strategy and all members are equally responsible for it. It is imperative that members keep aside their political differences for a common cause as delay will only embolden the terrorist organizations. Within existing parameters of interstate relations, a huge shift is not possible but small incremental steps would be more effective to enhance cooperation and probably in building confidence measures. The SAARC has the capacity and position to excel in dealing terrorism by applying the best use of its assets. Numerous suggestions are being made on this platform since 1987 but effective implementation is required. Exploring the reason of slow pace of SAARC, it is noted that existing mechanism is not a failure but member states are incapable to implement the agreements, treaties, conventions and protocols. The real problem is political not institutional. SAARC countries lack any regional culture to address common issue, irrespective of cost-benefit effects. Until the members will not be able to realize the benefits of cooperation and cost of non-cooperation, the organization will remain ineffective. All this indicates that

without measuring full cooperation and trust, just committees and agreements are insufficient. As long as there is tension, anxiety, suspicion and mistrust among the members mainly between India and Pakistan, the SAARC would not be able to take any solid step. Regional leadership need to build an atmosphere of trust by breaking the vicious cycle of terror and revenge. Unlike UN resolution on counterterrorism, the convention and protocol of SAARC are weaker and unspecific. The SAARC should evolve much more comprehensive and region-specific policy and all the conventions adopted against terrorism must be honored.

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Biographical Notes

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With South Asia being one of the fastest growing regions of the world, Swaraj said its true potential can be realised only if all countries contribute constructively towards delivering on the commitments SAARC has made to the people of the region. Swaraj voiced India's commitment to regional cooperation, saying it attaches highest priority to the development and prosperity of the region, under the government's 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Improving connectivity in all forms also remains vital for progress of the region and for increasing people-to-people contacts, Swaraj's Counter-terrorism and Regional Cooperation in South Asia. Index. The Terror Challenge in South Asia and. Dr Ramana was student of South Asian security studies. His MPhil dissertation "Role of the Navy in India's Security" (1996) and his Doctoral dissertation was entitled Military R&D in India: Programmes and Processes (2000). Dr. Pushpita Das is a Associate Fellow in the Terrorism and Internal Security Cluster of the IDSA. Almost every country in South Asia is faced with the problem of terrorism "in one form or the other. Sri Lanka has successfully managed to eliminate the LTTE. However, it remains to be seen how the situation is managed by the Sri Lankan government from here on, so that no such group emerges there in future. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of states in South Asia. Its member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The SAARC comprises 3% of the world's area, 21% of the world's population and 4.21% (US\$3.67 trillion) of the global economy, as of 2019.