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UN Counterterrorism Strategy in South Asia: Role of Media in its Implementation

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The Strategy

On 8 September 2006, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/288. It contained the United Nations Global Counterterrorism strategy. By then it had become fairly obvious that the then US President George W. Bush's so-called 'War on Terror' was failing to achieve the desired results. Iraq and Afghanistan had become imbroglios that underpinned the fallacies of military approaches in addressing the issue. A more sophisticated handling was called for. The global community aptly recognised the necessity of the UN being the principal mechanism, rather than any of its powerful member or members. Better still if the General Assembly, where all countries are represented, than the Security Council where a handful is present, takes the initiative.

So it did, and the strategy was born. It did acknowledge the key role of the Security Council, however. It agreed upon a comprehensive, global, strategic framework on counterterrorism. It brought all related activities of the UN system into a common framework. It accorded special emphasis to the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) and the UN Secretariat's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF).

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The classical Greeks insisted that before commencing any debate, one must define the terms. On this issue therein lay the rub. The UN membership could not reach consensus on the definition of a 'terrorist' or an 'act of terror'. The axiomatic point was made that one man's 'terrorist' is another man's 'freedom-fighter'. A working denotation of an 'act of terror' could be one in which 'innocent civilians' are victims. Again, it is not an easy matter to always agree on who is an 'innocent civilian'. Could a British District Commissioner during the Raj in India, engaged in actions against the freedom movement (which at times included acts, particularly in Bengal, which the British described as 'terrorist', and which often drew inspiration from the Irish situation at that time) be described as such? Indeed, as Professor Fred Halliday once said, frequent misuse of the term 'terrorism' employed routinely by politicians and others is a coded means of dismissing the volatility of a political cause. There is, therefore, no easy answer. But a rough rule of the thumb would be: indiscriminate killings in pursuit of a political goal (however 'noble' it may seem). As an analyst said, 'I know a terrorist act when I see one'.

The Implementation

The principal responsibility to implement the strategy, of course, as with all other UN resolutions, lies with the Member State and its agencies. But governments, as in other areas such as development or poverty alleviation, cannot do it alone. This is where the civil society organisations (CSOs) come in. A regional approach, as with other UN initiatives, is perhaps appropriate. This essay will look at South Asia, where the civil society is very active, and has often stepped into areas where a vacuum has been left by the State. All will agree, South Asia has had its share of terrorism: Afghanistan, Pakistan (in particular the Frontier regions), India – Mumbai mayhem of November 2008, the Maoist movement, though recognised as the 'principal threat to stability' by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Indian authorities are chary of describing Maoists as 'terrorists', another definitional quandary!), Sri Lanka (where the government vigorously argued that the Tamil separatists were 'terrorists!') and the Nepali example, where in complex political manoeuvrings former insurgents became part of the government!

South Asian Media

Within the broad spectrum of the civil society, the media – both print and electronic – in South Asia has apparently a special role in this regard. South Asia can rightly pride itself on a vibrant press. It is truly reflective of the rich argumentative culture and ethos that Amartya Sen has spoken of. It has been extremely supportive of pluralist and democratic norms. In every country in South Asia the media has pushed for these values. Though rooted in the colonial era of the British Raj (the first press was Portuguese!), it has continued to largely champion national political struggle, fundamental rights and social reforms. It has battled attempts made from time to time to constrain and restrict it. The media in South Asia has

facilitated broader participation of women in this profession. Women are present in large numbers as television anchors and presenters in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This enhances their role in the socio-political and economic sphere (This was also the case earlier with 'passive media' such as the cinema, with women actors flowing into public life, mainly in India, as also in Bangladesh). Both the print and electronic media in the region today number legion, and are ever expanding. In most countries it is witnessing a metamorphosis into corporatisation from private ownership. This comes with accompanying ramifications, including monopoly trends.

Obviously the media represents diverse view-points and causes. Sometimes it may be difficult to distinguish the struggle for positive change from unintended negative, and at times, violent consequences. There is a danger that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, the media can become 'the oxygen of terrorism'. There is the other extreme. Sometimes in South Asia the urge to combat violent extremism has also led a part of the media to call for the 'hard state' instead of the 'soft state' as it was wont to do earlier. Some see this reflection in India, following the Mumbai massacre. The challenge obviously is to seek and find the golden mean.

Media's Role

It would be in order for the media also to examine what causes violent behaviour pattern – political subjugation (Libya and Syria come to mind), extreme discrimination (we recall apartheid in South Africa), illegal occupation (Palestine, for instance). Add to these the neglect of those who cannot make the grade, those who are on the flip-side of the coin of success. These points must be addressed with a view to, if possible, helping resolve some of those issues or at any rate reducing their negative impact. We all know that such phenomena exist. These must not be cause for pessimism, but an invitation to sober reflection. No reaction is acceptable that causes the innocent to suffer.

Investigative journalism in some countries may at times be impeded by legislation. Sometimes these can severely restrict interactions, such as the conduct of interviews, with persons and organisations perceived to be terrorists. This is worth noting. A feature in South Asia, in tune with globalisation and some developments as the 'Arab Spring' (or the 'Arab Awakening' as some prefer to call it!) is the burgeoning influence of the social media platforms. With the demographic changes leading to a much greater youth population, cyber space activity is on the rise and is exerting ever greater influence. In South Asia it would be appropriate to widen the connotation of social media to include, not just 'twitter' and the 'face-book' and the 'internet', but the penchant in South Asia for the 'bazaar-gossip', that is for non-technological verbal communication that can spread like wild-fire.

So while there may be broad agreement that the media has a major responsibility, it is difficult to forge consensus on how this is to be discharged. Few in South Asia, both in the profession and outside, would conceivably support any restrictions imposed on the media,

particularly by the State. But some kind of a self-imposed discipline, a code of conduct for the media to avoid such reportage that tend to further the goals and purposes of ‘terrorists’, is not beyond the realm of possibility. Again, the media should consciously avoid giving in to the ‘producers’ of terrorist ideologies. This is more difficult than it appears because South Asian media likes to champion the causes of the down-trodden, who are also often the disgruntled, susceptible to violent extremism. This will require some ‘training’ (though journalists in South Asia tend to shun the term), or in any case ‘greater capacity-building’ in order to be able to do the required sifting. Most importantly the media can raise awareness of the threats, thereby ‘educating’ not just the public but also the policy-makers, collating ‘best practices’, and proactively setting norms and standards, not just from the region, but also from beyond. In short, the ‘fourth estate’ can be, indeed is, the fourth pillar upholding the structure of societal stability in South Asia.

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