Revamping India's Counter-Terrorism Approach

By Akanksha Narain and Vikram Rajakumar

Synopsis

In light of a growing transnational terrorist threat to India and South Asia, Delhi has to move beyond its Pakistan-oriented counter terrorism approach. With the arrest of ISIL operatives in India and the recent hacking of an Indian government's website by AQIS, India needs to adopt a more nuanced approach in sync with the increasing complexity of the threat.

Commentary

INDIA IS situated in a volatile and violent neighbourhood which has experienced insurgencies and terrorism for decades. It has been attacked by terrorist networks that it alleges have long been harboured and funded by neighbouring Pakistan. It has been in constant battles with a variety of radical militants who seek to destabilise it.

Prior to 11 September the Kashmiri militants and jihadi groups were the vanguard of the terrorist attacks, alongside Maoists and northeast tribal separatists. With the advent of the Al Qaeda era post-2001, though India's focus remained on battling threats emanating from across the border and internally, the extent of the jihadi threat increased manifold, especially in Kashmir. For decades terrorist groups based in Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Hizbut Mujahideen (HM), which India alleges were sponsored by its regional nemesis, dominated India's terrorism landscape.

Rise of global jihadism

The tribal areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, which have long been outside the effective control of both states, is a natural sanctuary for militants. Now

with ISIS, also known as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and Levant) in the picture, India has become a target of global jihadists in the region.

With the rise of the ISIL and its play of the Islamic symbols of the *Caliphate*, *Ummah* and *Hijra*, new Indian youth constituencies have now shown a greater disposition to align themselves with global jihadism.

Pertinently, youths from the southern parts of the country, a region that traditionally has not seen serious penetration of global jihadism, are aligning with ISIL's ideology. About 32 individuals from South India have been arrested by the authorities for being involved with ISIL. And numerous others have been rumoured to have travelled to Syria to fight in the on-going civil war there.

The internet has played an instrumental role in connecting the Indian youths to a global community of Islamist terrorists. It has proven to be much more potent than off-line jihadi recruiters of the past. Given the spike in the number of youths radicalised in the past year, it is clear that ISIL's propaganda content and approach is more appealing and meaningful than Al Qaeda's amongst constituencies that were previously unaffected.

Notwithstanding, AQ has not lost its regional salience as evidenced by its creation of the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), with an Indian Muslim, Maulana Asim Umar, as its emir. Though AQIS has not mounted any terrorist attacks, it had hacked the Indian railways website, leaving a message of call to join jihad and is attempting to build a strong network of terrorist groups throughout the subcontinent.

Moving Away from Pakistan-centric Approach

Despite the evolving threat of jihadi terrorism in the world, with the onslaught of terror groups like ISIL and the phenomenon of 'Lone Wolf' attacks, the Indian authorities are still approaching the threat in the traditional way. Even though, as India alleges, Pakistan has played a role in financing, arming and harbouring terrorist and insurgent groups against India, and its association with JeM, LeT and HM, India is holding back in formulating its counter-terrorism strategy against the changing terror landscape, including ISIL's global campaign and penetration into India.

Indian authorities have not gone beyond blaming Pakistan for attacks targeting military or police establishments, such as the Pathankot airbase, or civilian targets as in the case of the Mumbai and Hyderabad attacks. This, of course, does not mean that terrorism emanating from India's western borders has diminished. It behooves the Indian authorities to adopt a new strategy at a time when a number of terrorist groups in South Asia have splintered and are no longer under the absolute control of Pakistan.

This makes further sense when Pakistan uses the phrase "Good Taliban, Bad Taliban", hinting that many of the terrorist attacks may not have the sanction of the Pakistani establishment. Nor might the state have the capacity to rein in terrorist groups, given the splintering and attacks such as those in Peshawar.

Secondly, the new attraction of global jihadism in South India as evidenced by the

arrest of young, educated ISIL sympathisers and operatives from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra, further indicate that India needs to look beyond Pakistan, especially when ISIL has been successful in carrying out lone wolf attacks across the globe.

Way Forward

India is no stranger to managing terrorism. However, security agencies have been weighed down by their older counter-terrorism paradigm. They have to recognise the need for a new paradigm and pursue it in order to effectively manage the threat of global jihadism that now confronts India.

The changed nature of the increasingly transnational terror environment means that we will not witness 'terror spectaculars' as seen during the attacks in Mumbai or New York. Instead there is a higher propensity for 'lone wolves' to carry out small-scale attacks on both military and civilian targets and for AQIS and ISIL to claim responsibility for them. Unfortunately, this means that such attacks carried out by self-radicalised individuals may escape the radar of Indian agencies which are still set in the Pakistan-centric terrorism paradigm.

India thus needs to adopt a nuanced counter-terrorism policy. Among others it needs to implement the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) and the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) project so as to create nodal agencies and foster greater intelligence sharing. It needs to train its security agencies to think outside the realm of normalcy, improve community cohesion and address the issue of radicalisation, especially in regions that were previously untouched by jihadist propaganda.

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