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Issue Brief

Regional Cooperation in Counter-Terrorism

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March 24, 2016

The international security architecture today hinges upon “cooperation” and “collective action”. Forging new partnerships at the regional and sub-regional levels is necessary for any constructive effort in Counter-Terrorism (CT). Regional organisations, therefore, have an important role to play in synergising counter-terrorism efforts into a comprehensive strategy and creating a united front.

In order to counter terrorism and violent extremism, strategies should focus on “cooperation among all”, be cognizant of the diversity in the society and sensitive to their varying needs. In this context, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, of Pakistan on the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations said that United Nations was established “to build universal peace and prosperity on the basis of equitable principles, cooperation and collective action.” He further said, “Peace can be achieved through dialogue, not disengagement.”¹ President Xi Jinping, of China, addressing the 70th session of UNGA called for a new form of international relations, one that sought partnerships rather than alliances.² The statements given by both leaders provide guiding principles for achieving world peace and harmony, in the fight against militancy and violent extremism.

Terrorism, post 9/11, was viewed from a security lens, and military solutions were adopted for a quick-fix, whereas, today, we witness a paradigm shift in counter-terrorism approaches.

This new approach to counter-terrorism is more preventive in nature, and works towards building an inclusive, tolerant and progressive political and socio-economic environment. Moreover, the concept ‘violent extremism’ is linked to broader governance failures, intolerance in society and socio-economic disparities.³ Similarly, UN Global CT strategy adopted in 2006 presents a comprehensive framework which recognises that “underlying grievances and conflicts feed extremism”.⁴ Therefore, the present framework of CT focuses on peace and development as two essential elements in fight against violent extremism.

Furthermore, this strategy seeks better border management and imposition of travel restrictions on foreign fighters. It proposes new means of challenging violent extremist narratives on social media. Moreover, it emphasises working with religious leaders and inter-

faith community engagement, as a means for creating awareness about the perils of violent extremism (VE). The UN Global Action Plan calls for "standing with the civil society" against countering VE. Youth engagement is another essential element of this action plan that envisages skills development, employment, scholarships and opportunities for civic engagement.

The UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, on October 01, 2015, addressing the UNGA, emphasised the need for stronger global plus regional partnerships, which facilitate a network of actors for maintaining collective peace and security.⁵ In this regard, strengthening the capacities of regional organisations emerged as a suggestion from all participating member states.

Regional organisations display respective strengths in their regional contexts; with deeper understanding of the local issues. They also have a network of local actors, whose help can be mobilised in an effective and targeted manner. Also, these local actors would take ownership of the interventions, come up with better solutions and, most importantly, would prevent problems from re-surfacing. In addition, such a community-oriented approach to counter-terrorism would mitigate the risk of marginalising any group, sect, or religion, which is often exploited by terrorists for breeding extremism.

In addition, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda passed in the 70th session of UNGA complements international counter-terrorism framework. Member states of the UN will now have to ascertain an inclusive, adaptive, and flexible translation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in their respective contexts. In this regard, regional organisations would have to make efforts aimed at imparting political energy for securing structured cooperation, geared towards conflict prevention. Financial support and capacity building of regional and sub-regional organisations is yet another imperative for effective regional cooperation on counter-terrorism. International community, under the UN Charter, should share this burden, not shift it. Moreover, a structured approach will ensure that there is no unnecessary overlapping of responsibilities.

A comparative threat assessment of the Asia-Pacific and South Asia, highlights certain common challenges. First, the loose framework of border control has led to an increase in the number of foreign fighters moving from one battlefield to another. In this context, Pakistan too needs to strengthen its border management. Second, for a crackdown on illicit financing, international and regional cooperation is essential. For this purpose, Pakistan is working in close collaboration with financial institutions and countries from where the money is channeled into its borders for terrorist activities. Third, the use of technology and social media by terrorists highlights the changing nature of warfare. Cyber warfare and espionage are now threatening critical state machinery. Pakistan is taking note of these non-conventional threats and requires cooperation and support from its friends and allies in international community for developing effective mechanisms.

In the global war on terror, Pakistan has emerged as a front-line state. Pakistan's military, in a series of military operations has wiped-out terrorist infrastructure from its soil. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, addressing the 70th Anniversary of the UNGA said, "Our Operation Zarb-e-Azb, is the largest anti-terrorism campaign against terrorists anywhere, involving over 180,000 of our security forces. It has made substantial progress in cleansing our country of all terrorists and will conclude only when our objective has been accomplished." Furthermore he added, "This Operation is complemented by an all-inclusive National Action Plan. It encompasses police and security actions, political and legal measures and social and economic policy packages, aimed at countering violent extremism."⁶

These efforts will go in vain if they are not complemented with support and cooperation from other regional actors. Pakistan is a member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) and will be joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2016. Pakistan has lived up to international aspirations in the war against terrorism and in the process has incurred unprecedented loss.

Some regional actors, however, are creating impediments in Pakistan's efforts for maintaining peace and security. The Indian cooperation is missing from the peace process, and without it

Pakistan cannot ensure regional peace. Unless conflicts are resolved in the region, there cannot be durable peace, and a lasting resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is fundamental to sustainable peace and security.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a mega project that will revive the old silk route and connect East Asia with Southern Central Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe. Pakistan's Vision 2025 emphasises unprecedented regional connectivity. With more avenues opening for regional cooperation, counter-terrorism must evolve in tandem. Moreover, preventive approaches to violent extremism should be synchronised with sustainable economic development goals. International community should also play a positive role in solving regional conflicts and setting mutually beneficial frameworks through regional organisations. Counter-terrorism has evolved much in the past decade, and this is a continuous process that cannot prosper in isolation, and without regional cooperation.

Notes and References

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- ¹ Khan Zahid, "Text of PM Address to 70th Session of UN General Assembly", SAMA News, September 30, 2015, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://www.samaa.tv/pakistan/2015/09/text-of-pm-address-to-70th-session-of-un-general-assembly/>
 - ² "General Debate of the 70th Session," General Assembly of United Nations, accessed January 6th, 2016, <http://gadebate.un.org/70/china#sthash.22DyzTuk.dpuf>
 - ³ "To Counter Violent Extremism, Focus on Fighting Poverty and Improving Governance," World Economic Forum, accessed January 6th, 2016, <https://agenda.weforum.org/news/to-counter-violent-extremism-focus-on-fighting-poverty-and-improving-governance/>
 - ⁴ General Debate of the 70th Session, Op.cit.
 - ⁵ "Secretary-General's remarks at High-Level Thematic Debate of the General Assembly marking the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations under the theme: "Maintenance of International Peace and Security," United Nation, accessed January 6th, 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9083>
 - ⁶ General Debate of the 70th Session, Op.cit.