



### THE INADEQUACIES OF INDIAN COUNTER TERRORISM STRUCTURE

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The United States will set up a counter-terrorism training centre in India as part of an agreement with homeland security signed in New Delhi during the recent visit of President Trump in February 2020.<sup>1</sup> The absence of a central unit to combat terrorism in India is a big hurdle in handling internal issues of terrorism. The absence of central body that can coordinate the sharing of information pertaining to terrorists and their activities among Indian army, intelligence agencies and police has been the main reason for the establishment of CT training centre. The main aim of establishing this centre on the lines of National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) in US is to fill a major loophole in Indian counter-terrorism structure i.e coordination among security agencies.

Currently, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in India is working as the central body in the counter-terrorism structure of India. It is collaborating with its international partners like CIA, FBI and FATF. NIA has also issued a list of 42 banned organizations in India.<sup>2</sup> The aim of NIA is to create deterrence for existing and potential terrorist groups/individuals. It also aims to develop as a storehouse of all terrorist related information.<sup>3</sup> Considering the above aims mean that a central authority is already functioning in India though with limited access and coordination and its major

<sup>1</sup> "US to set up counter-terrorism centre in India", *The News*, February 24, 2020,

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/619045-us-to-set-up-counter-terrorism-centre-in-india>

<sup>2</sup> Official website of National Investigation Agency India, <https://www.nia.gov.in/vision-mission.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

collaboration is with US security agencies. This raises questions over the nature of functions of the new center that India is aiming to establish with the help of US.

Indian and US officials had met in 2019 for the sixteenth meeting of the US-India Counter-Terrorism Joint Working Group and the second session of the US-India Designations Dialogue.<sup>4</sup> The officials exchanged views on threats posed by international terrorist organizations as well as ongoing concerns over cross-border terrorism in the South Asian region. State Department Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, Ambassador Nathan A. Sales emphasized US cooperation with India in the fight against terrorism. Both sides underlined the urgent need in the region to take meaningful, irreversible, and verifiable action against terrorists and terrorist groups.<sup>5</sup> Considering the fact that the arrest of Indian spy Kalbhoshan Jaadev from Pakistani territory raises many questions on Indian desires to counter terrorism in the region, one may argue that Indian optics of counter-terrorism measures in the region are far different from the reality on the ground.

US relations with its long standing allies over the past years has taken some dramatic turns for the worst and similarly, the case has been the opposite in terms of its relations with enemies. The recent shift in the US strategy in Asia is showing how US wants to keep its presence in the region in the form of renewed alliances. After successful conclusion of Afghan peace deal in February 2020, US is now strengthening its alliance with India by enhancing its defence relations so that India may pursue the line of interest given by the US. During his meetings with Indian officials over his visit, US President Donald Trump said, "India and the US have expanded their defence cooperation with agreements for New Delhi to purchase more than USD 3 billion of advanced American military equipment, including Apache and MH-60 Romeo helicopters - the finest in the world."<sup>6</sup> The expansion of military sales shows that India is aiming to achieve counter-terrorism cooperation with US on regional level, especially in Afghanistan. However, India is unable to justify its significant presence in Afghanistan as there is no direct border between India and Afghanistan and the effects on India of the situation in Afghanistan is far less.

Another aspect that needs attention is the home grown problems of terrorism and extremism in India which is affecting all its regional neighbors in a negative manner. According to Indian media, one of the three Islamic State (IS) suicide attackers, Abu Khalid Al-Hindi, who carried out an attack

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<sup>4</sup> Media note by US India counter terrorism joint working group, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-u-s-india-counterterrorism-joint-working-group-and-designations-dialogue/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "US confronting Pakistan on terrorism; India-US sign \$3billion defence deals: Trump", *The Economic Times*, February 25, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/us-confronting-pakistan-on-terrorism-india-us-sign-3-billion-defence-deals-trump/videoshow/74299901.cms?from=mdr>

on a Gurdwara in Afghanistan on March 25, 2020 killing around 25 people is a recruit from Indian state of Kerala.<sup>7</sup> Facts show that the process of home grown terrorism and extremism in India is not new. Even in this case, according to the Indian intelligence reports the attacker left India in 2018 to join ISKP and the Indian authorities were not aware of his travel to Afghanistan. Similarly, back in 2016 more than 20 young recruits travelled to Afghanistan from Kasargod and Malappuram districts in Kerala, India.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, there is a dire need for India to focus on its internal problems which are causing security damages in the region.

Cooperation between India and US in the field of counter-terrorism is not a new one. Back in 2018, India and US signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for exchange of intelligence on terror on a real time basis that includes biographic information of known and suspected terrorists. With signing of this key pact, India had formally entered into the US Homeland Security Presidential Directive-6 (HSPD-6), which enabled it to access unclassified biographic information of known and suspected terrorists maintained by US on a reciprocal basis. A question rises here that with the absence of any central body on counter-terrorism how is India able to disseminate information coming from HSPD-6 further to its security agencies. NIA having limited coordination with police and few non-police organizations do not have a strong structure to distribute such information on real time basis.

India's approach to setup a counter-terrorism training centre with the help of US seems to be an overambitious plan, especially when there is no formal internal mechanism of cooperation present in Indian counter-terrorism strategy. The absence of a central unit to combat terrorism in India is a big hurdle in handling its internal issues of terrorism. According to Indian sources, absence of central body that can coordinate the sharing of information pertaining to terrorists and their activities among Indian army, intelligence agencies and police needs attention.<sup>9</sup> The new centre lacks a single counter-terrorist agency that merges all the three components (physical action, intelligence and investigation). There are many reasons behind the absence of such a body in India, but the most

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<sup>7</sup> Saneep Unnithan, "Exclusive: Kabul gurdwara attacker was IS recruit from Kerala", *India Today*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/kabul-gurdwara-attack-attacker-islamic-state-is-recruit-kerala-india-1660402-2020-03-27?fbclid=IwAR1w8c9y2evtn0tJh88JSCfmdl0NFBmGkKzQJ76-Cn7lWJx8hHlLswuRhnl>

<sup>8</sup> Deeptiman Tiwary, "Kabul gurdwara attacker from Kerala, left for Afghanistan in 2018", *The Indian Express*, March 28, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kabul-gurdwara-attacker-kerala-mohammed-muhsin-6335210/?fbclid=IwAR3Clj1WEE5iiDKSKVI9BR5y6aeSEY27Xhb3M6uEFaMSLm7v9FmtLGsmu4M>

<sup>9</sup> Rahul Tripathi, "Absence of central anti-terror body a hurdle, says NSA Ajit Doval", *The Economic Times*, October 14, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/absence-of-central-anti-terror-body-a-hurdle-says-nsa-ajit-doval/articleshow/71587114.cms>

important one is that the security agencies of India do not want to dilute their powers by forming such a body. Secondly, how will this body be able to justify the ongoing acts of state terrorism in Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Despite major lacking in its anti-terrorism structure, India is still managing to pressurize Pakistan on the forum of Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which raises many questions on the forum for being used as a political tool by states against each other.

The Modi government's ostentatious objective of breaking the terrorist structures in India by grabbing international hands needs serious revision. For that to happen, India will have to put its own house in order first. India will have to change its approach towards the internal problems that are contributing to home grown terrorism and extremism.