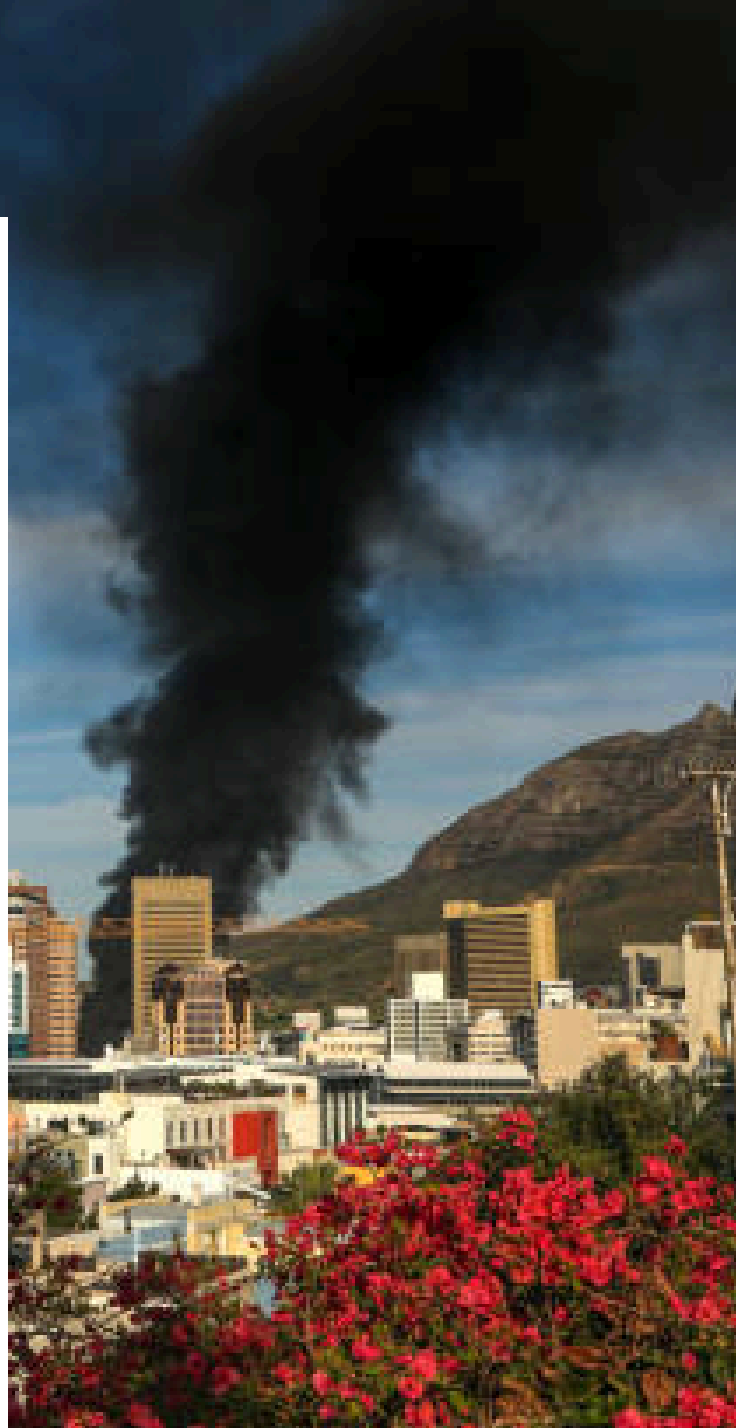# Issue Brief

Terrorism and Violent Extremism: A threat to regional security in South Asia

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Introduction

Terrorism is the use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, to achieve political, religious, or ideological goals or in the name of politics, religion, and peace advocacy by states as well as non-state groups, and this vaguely describes the term terrorism. However, there is some confusion in defining this concept, while some definitions rely on broad criteria- "The Perpetrator, The target and the Weapons used, others emphasize the motive and purpose behind the action of terrorism." [1]

A terrorist aims not just for the destruction but also to drive the message of terror home. But beyond these, the term "Terrorism" is hard to define because it is usually linked with trying to create public terror, so the term terrorism is based on the matter of perception. Due to political factors, the meaning of terrorism easily changes as per the interests of particular states on specific issues. "Today the Taliban head the International terrorist list, but once they were called freedom fighters (Mujahideen) and were supported by the U.S. when they were fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan."[2]

There have been countless examples of political bloodshed and terrorist activity throughout South Asia. The causes and characteristics of terrorism differ throughout nations. The present wave of radicalization and terrorism poses a serious threat to the security of the South Asian region. The contradiction resulting from unfounded national policies might be connected to the politics of violence and extremist tendencies in South Asia.

The use of violence by people or groups to further political, intellectual, religious, or social objectives is referred to as violent extremism. It frequently involves extreme ideas that oppose diversity and tolerance, encouraging acts of terrorism, insurrection, and other violent crimes. Political beliefs, social grievances, ethnic nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and other factors can all give rise to violent extremism.

Terrorism and its Impact on South Asia

Most South Asian countries have seen severe economic damage as a result of terrorism. The immediate effects of terrorism include harm to standing crops, industry, and infrastructure, as well as a halt to economic activity. Numerous more unintended consequences result from it, all of which are caused by general economic depression. As a result, the nation suffers from brain drain, high transaction costs, higher military spending, and other inefficiencies, and its economy is unable to draw in foreign investment.

There has never been a greater threat from terrorism to South Asia than there is right now. With almost one-third of the world's population living here, the region is home to more terrorist organizations and individuals than any other. Terrorist assaults have claimed more lives in this region than any other place in the globe. A variety of terrorist organizations operating in the area and outside provide a major threat to at least five of the countries in the region: Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. With several terrorist organizations active in the region that are linked to both ISIL and Al-Qaida, the threat level in South Asia as a whole is still high, and in 12 states in India, left-wing extremism affects at least 77 districts, while in roughly 68 of Nepal's 75 districts, Maoist insurgents are active to varied degrees.

Terrorism and its Impact on South Asia

The data below is shown on the South Asia Terrorism portal:-

Yearly Fatalities (Without Afghanistan)

Advance Search

Data View   Graph View   Chart View   Map view

Year	Incidents of Killing	Civilians	Security Forces	Terrorists/Insurgents/Extremists	Not Specified	Total
2000*	2666	1668	1510	5216	35	8429
2001	3623	1955	1638	4935	198	8726
2002	3681	1668	1457	7216	255	10596
2003	3259	1640	866	4101	280	6887
2004	2993	1640	1239	3551	278	6708
2005	2830	1989	920	3347	144	6400
2006	2870	2287	1767	4542	639	9235
2007	3171	2718	1514	5799	740	10771
2008	5056	3081	2460	14205	752	20498
2009	3473	13142	2755	12458	897	29252
2010	2214	2322	875	5757	372	9326
2011	2167	2774	875	3250	255	7154
2012	2914	3035	866	2888	272	7061
2013	2730	3263	860	2069	377	6569
2014	2163	1905	678	3756	267	6606
2015	1447	1064	493	2851	76	4484
2016	1090	788	473	1507	68	2836
2017	779	655	393	1035	82	2165
2018	660	584	341	721	10	1656
2019	490	566	275	441	0	1282
2020	497	271	284	547	0	1102
2021	583	331	330	589	0	1250
2022	667	348	426	633	1	1408
2023	877	607	619	834	7	2067
2024	653	413	393	659	5	1470
Total**	53553	50714	24307	92907	6010	173938

*Data since March 6, 2000. ** Data till , August 11, 2024

Source: Compiled from news reports and are provisional.

Yearly Fatalities (Including Afghanistan)**

Advance Search

Data View   Graph View   Chart View

Year	Incidents of Killing	Civilians	Security Forces	Terrorists/Insurgents/Extremists	Not Specified	Total
2018	2448	1868	1898	12604	147	16517
2019	2213	1383	1003	11075	6	13467
2020	1653	1118	1501	6076	86	8781
2021	1763	1453	1118	6975	173	9719
2022	1083	1002	429	716	914	3061
2023	1145	913	619	908	127	2567
2024	897	571	393	674	297	1935
Total	11202	8308	6961	39028	1750	56047

** From January 1, 2018 Afghanistan fatalities also added to South Asia Fatalities

Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South Asian Countries

Almost every country in South Asia has encountered terrorism in one face or another. Why do most countries that are democratic in nature face the problem of terrorism? One of the main issues in the connection between terrorism and democracy is that not every democracy is equally welcoming, pluralistic, or supportive of the rights of minorities. Minorities may be the target of systematic discrimination by the elected majority. The groups using terrorism advocate a variety of reasons, including right-wing extremism, religion, left-wing revolutionism, ethno-nationalism and separatist movements. The level of social-ethnic and political heterogeneity or fragmentation within the state seems to be a crucial factor in the case of terrorism that is produced within a democracy.

India being the largest country in South Asia geographically, has been affected by insurgencies, separatist movements, and terrorism. India has a complex problem with terrorism, which is fueled by a range of issues such as socio-economic, political, religious, and ethnic conflicts. The nation has experienced terrorism in a variety of forms, from acts driven by both international and indigenous extremist groups to separatist movements in areas like Kashmir and the Northeast. The Indian Parliament was the target of a blatant terrorist attack in 2001. 26/11, refers to the series of coordinated attacks that occurred in Mumbai on November 26, 2008, Another is the attack on Pulwama, on February 14, 2019, carried out by the Islamist militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed. The country is still a target of terror attacks, despite multiple security forces counterterrorism and anti-militancy operations as well as stringent government measures.

In the case of Afghanistan, its complicated history, politics, and socioeconomic circumstances are intricately entwined with the country's ongoing and tragic challenge of terrorism. Afghanistan is one of the most terrorist-affected nations in the world, and different extremist organizations frequently use its land as a battlefield. The persistent instability in the region has been exacerbated by the emergence and collapse of many regimes, foreign interventions, and the existence of extreme ideologies. It has been at the center of counterterrorism efforts ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Hizb-e-Islami are just a few of the deadly groups that pose a serious threat to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is often associated with "narco-terrorism" due to its significant drug production and export industry.

In **Bangladesh**:- Bangladesh has always been concerned about its security, especially in light of the rise in terrorism in recent years. The nation has seen many different types of terrorism, from political violence to extreme religious belief. The government is taking action against radical Islamist groups such as HUJI (Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami) and JMB (Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh), AA which became prominent after the 1990s. Although left-wing extremism is still an issue in some areas of Bangladesh, its influence appears to have decreased recently. The concerning thing about Bangladesh is the abundance of conditions that encourage terrorism to proliferate, including high rates of youth unemployment, stark economic inequality, escalating religious fanaticism, and easy access to weapons.

Pakistan and Afghanistan face the most serious threats. Both of these nations are home to Taliban activity. Six gunmen connected to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) carried out a terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, a city in northwest Pakistan, on December 16, 2014. They entered the building and opened fire at students and staff, killing 149 people, including 132 students who were between the ages of eight and eighteen. Pakistan is considered a terrorist-safe haven by the U.S. Country Reports on Terrorism due to insufficient political will, governance capacity, or both. These factors allow terrorists to plot, organize, raise money, communicate, recruit, train, transport, and operate in relative security.

In Sri Lanka, Terrorism has played a significant and tragic part of the country's history, especially during the 1983–2009 Sri Lankan Civil War. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant group that aimed to establish an independent Tamil state in the island's northern and eastern regions, and the Sri Lankan government were the main parties involved in the conflict. Today, the LTTE has been successfully eradicated in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it appears that the state is considering several strategies to take Tamil interests into account. However, the fight against terrorism is far from over. The terrorist attack in Sri Lanka on April 21, 2019, serves as a sobering reminder of South Asia's susceptibility to terrorist attacks.

Counter Terrorism and Preventing Violent Extremism

Countless people around the world have suffered greatly as a result of the growth of violent extremism and the intolerance that extremist groups promote. In South Asia, some variables, such as poverty, illiteracy, political grievances, and religious extremism, are responsible for violent extremism. A multifaceted strategy that prioritizes addressing the underlying causes, promoting social cohesion and inclusion, addressing socio-economic inequalities, advancing economic and educational possibilities, encouraging religious dialogue, and building counterterrorism measures is required to prevent it.

Often, national leaders find the concept of waging a "war" against terrorism less appealing. They contended that using force can only lead to reprisals or, worse, the return of terrorism's original form, in which the government uses terror to repress its own people. They think that using legal measures to combat terrorism is the best strategy. The greatest way to combat terrorism is within national borders and through collaborative international law enforcement efforts to apprehend terrorists and give a fair trial, these people choose to use violence and destructive activities to bring attention to their concerns for which they believe national systems are unable to provide solutions, it leads to anarchy and international terrorism.

In order to prevent violent extremism and terrorism, various measures should be taken, such as successful reconciliation programs that deal with the underlying causes of conflicts, which should be followed by programs on counter-narratives, de-radicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former violent extremists into society.

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Military and Diplomatic Strategies

Bilateral rivalries between the South Asian parties have deterred attempts at regional collaboration against terrorism. As early as the 1990s, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), for example, might have developed into a powerful forum to combat the terrorism wave. The member nations signed the Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (SCST) in November 1987 because they were aware of the potential effects of the Afghan Militancy on the region and wanted to increase regional cooperation on legal matters, such as sharing evidence, extradition, and the exchange of knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, these were never implemented and kept remaining on the paper, which is quite the reality for SAARC, because of political rivalry.

For example, in 2002, in response to UN Security Council Resolution-1373, 2001, a new protocol was added to the Convention in response to the 9/11 attacks. This protocol addressed the issue of terrorist financing and called for the immediate criminalization of the collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts. Additionally, SAARC established the Terrorist Offenses Monitoring Desk (STOMD) in Colombo, Sri Lanka, with the purpose of gathering, examining, and sharing data regarding terrorist plans, techniques, and tactics. The establishment of an Expert Group on Networking Among Police Authorities (NAPA) and the Drug Offenses Monitoring Desk (SDOMD) were two other significant Counterterrorism projects.

In 2006, Composite Dialogue between India and Pakistan could have reached a consensus in the Joint Anti-terrorism Mechanism, but was disrupted by the consecutive terror attacks in July and November 2008. So far, any measures for counter-terrorism has been marred by political instability and rivalries between countries, and for the countries to combat terrorism, they need to move beyond that.

Conclusion

Terrorism and violent extremism pose a significant and ongoing threat to regional security in South Asia. The region is highly vulnerable due to its diverse social, ethnic, and political landscape, as well as historical and ongoing conflicts. While numerous efforts have been made to counter these threats, including regional agreements and initiatives, progress has been hindered by political rivalries and a lack of effective cooperation. To effectively combat terrorism and prevent violent extremism, South Asian countries must adopt a multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes of extremism and fosters greater regional collaboration, moving beyond political discord to achieve lasting security and stability.

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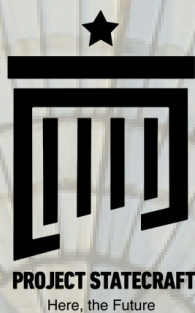
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