



MILITANT
GROUPS
IN
SOUTH
ASIA

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Book Review: Militant Groups in South Asia

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Nature of terrorism has changed. A quarter of century ago, it was regarded as a law and order problem, but now it is posing the biggest security threat to nation states. Almost all the countries of the world have been affected by terrorism. Today, terrorist groups are operating beyond the natural boundaries and are drawing support from many sources including the States in many cases. They have global networking with potential allies, other terrorist groups, arms suppliers and have financial support from different sources.

—Ambassador Jayant Prasad

Militancy is a form of conflict that manifests itself when a part of society in a specific state acts to impose its will on others by means beyond the established laws of the land. It expresses itself by extraconstitutional use of force that lies in an amorphous zone between the capacity of law-and-order agencies and the military apparatus mandated to secure the state against external threats, i.e., conventional conflict between states. To begin with, this results in long-drawn-out struggles between the state and the militant groups. The state responses are inhibited by the laws of the land while actions of the militants, other than the limits of their will and their potential to do harm, are unconstrained. As it is demonstrated historically, over a period of time, militancy evolves beyond its original scope, acquires enhanced capacities, ups its virulence, creates facilitating alliances beyond original geographic parameters and acquires a supranational character.

Besides having its origins in domestic occurrences, this phenomenon has acquired strategic dimensions with serious transnational ramifications. It has become a tool for weaker powers to resolve international disputes

without resorting to the exceptionally expensive method of achieving political objectives short of waging war. This is tantamount to waging 'proxy wars' sans attribution, thereby affording deniability by employing state resources to support militancy in an adversarial state. In other words 'state sponsors' of terrorism have become an adjunct to diplomacy, as has been well brought out in this study.

'Militant Groups in South Asia' is a sober and meaningful exposition of this phenomenon, profiling the important militant groups currently active in countries of the region less those that have merged with larger groups or have been inactive for some time.

The study identifies the factors leading to the rise of militancy, ranging from 'ideological motivations . . . deprivation, ethnicity, sectarian and cultural assertion' – a direct consequence of inept governance, lack of infrastructure and resources, diverse ethnicity and inability of the state to create appropriate means to administer justice and law and order and last, but not the least, religious diversity. At the time South Asia broke away from under the yoke of colonialism, the British left a legacy of large tracts of ungovernable or ungoverned spaces that were ideal for the conception and propagation of militancy.

After a brief introduction, the authors have tackled the subject in four parts based on states and the nature of the militancy. Under each, they have listed the primary groups and compiled 'detailed information on their genesis, ideology, objectives, cadre strengths, training, alliance, areas of operation, leadership, funding sources, weapons they use, the links with other militant groups and current status'.

'More than 200 groups are operating in the region today.' The study profiles these groups by cataloguing their current capacities and future perceptions, examining them under the following heads: history and genesis, objectives and agenda, ideology, organisational structure and leadership, cadre strength, recruitment and training, area of operation and influence, alliances, finance and funding sources, weapons in possession and procurement and, finally, the current status of each group.

The study has, thus, created an excellent data base for research analysts and governments to formulate appropriate policy to bolster the security mechanisms to secure their national security interests.

On the surface, the study 'Militant Groups in South Asia' produced under the aegis of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, is a simplistic task of compilation of data. However, there is much more to it than meets the eye. Information has been so organised that that it generates synthesised intelligence for concerned departments in the government to formulate policies; substantial material for research analysts and academia for further studies concerning specific entities, affected states and the South Asia region on the whole; and for law-and-order agencies, including the military, to plan and execute operational policy.

Equally important is the manner in which it brings out the sea change in established norms of international relations and the conduct of war amongst occidental civilisations as propagated by pundits like Hans Morgenthau and the conduct of war by Von Clausewitz. On the other hand, it brings into prominence the teachings of great oriental thinkers, like Kautilya and Sun Tzu, highlighting the strategic thought processes that are at the root of militancy in South Asia, suggesting more fitting means of tackling this malaise.

What does flow from this examination, which is much more than the mere cataloguing of different groups, and adds to the value of the book is the wide and varied scope of militancy that exists in South Asia that requires differing responses by state forces mandated to control it. Threads flow from disparate groups in diverse geographic areas that are driven by distinctive goals that go into shaping the larger state and regional matrix of militancy.

What comes out clearly in the study is that there are different shades of militancy in the region: Some are:

- Militancy is wholly domestic in nature, limited by problems peculiar to the affected area.
- Militancy was initially limited to localised geographic provinces and with a propensity to expand outwards.
- Militancy has state-sponsored transnational machinations.

- Militancy is afflicted by splintering of groups as a consequence of individual aspirations or evolving objectives in keeping with widening aspirations and infighting.
- There is an inherent amoebic nature of constituents of the group to self-multiply.
- There are creeping increments in war-fighting capabilities or freeing resources in adherence to final goals. For example, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) spokesperson Azim Tariq stated that the TTP would fight a 'decisive battle' in India once Pakistan and Afghanistan were under the control of the Taliban, adding 'Soon we will teach India a lesson as India's defeat at the hands of the Mujahideen is written in our holy books.'
- Militants are those born of a collective/induced aspiration to secede from the state.
- The intent is to cease political power by means of force and continue to be part of the larger state.
- There is a propensity to resist interference and turn on their sponsors where exit policies are not thought out.
- Militants do not recognise state laws and international conventions of war, creating new parameters that require extraconstitutional laws that tend to introduce debilitating effects, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA).
- Last, but not the least, the most virulent forms of militancy are associated with sectarian objectives tending to be genocidal.

At the embryonic stage, militancy is designed to establish control over the population by terrorising the local population into compliance; recruiting, training and organising human cadres; identifying and securing space for operations and establishing bases; obtaining resources to arm, equip and underwrite cadres and neutralising the existing law-and-order apparatus of the state. Militant movements are, by their very nature, incoherent movements bonded by devotion to an ideology and cause to which the cadres are drawn. In the South Asian experience, militancy initially

propagated itself in keeping with the tenets of guerrilla warfare and subsequently enlarged its scope, outlined by the study aptly as 'mission creep'.

INDIA

Militancy in India, the largest state in the region, differs radically from that manifesting in Pakistan and Bangladesh. It raised its head along the remote and underdeveloped regions of provinces in the east, northeast and central India. The development of these areas was comparatively neglected. They fell into parts of the country that, for a host of reasons, were either ungoverned or ungovernable spaces and generally underdeveloped. Furthermore, these parts were inhabited by tribal people, whose socioeconomic systems were based on tribal laws and norms, with little if any exposure to those in the more developed states. All the factors identified by the study that gave rise to militancy – 'ideological motivations . . . deprivation, ethnicity, sectarian and cultural assertion' – existed in these areas.

However, as militancy snowballed, the objectives of the militants evolved. To a large extent, this can be attributed to the government's inability to appreciate the situation for what it actually was, inept responses and failure to address and remedy the problems of the people.

Militancy cannot be blanketed under one template. Each has to be understood for what it is – as is so fittingly illustrated in the study – and responses formulated to address specific situations. For example, the objective of militants in the northeastern states is to secede from the Indian Union; in Assam, it's a matter of correcting the socioeconomic imbalances and grievances that have accumulated over time by inept governance. In the underdeveloped central parts of the country, militancy is driven by the Maoists, whose objective 'is to wage a protracted people's war to capture or seize the political power of the state to establish a new democratic order on the political lines propounded by Mao Tse-tung. The aspired for 'new democracy' will be under the leadership of the agrarian class and will be conducted through guerrilla warfare methods'.

Militancy on the northwestern and western borders is yet another kettle of fish. A product of the maleficent partition of the subcontinent by

the British gave cause to Pakistan's claim to the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Failure to wrest this territory in 1947 and 1965 by military means resulted in Pakistan's efforts to destabilise the region through sponsoring militancy in J&K. For the past quarter century, Pakistan has provided political and material support to subvert a section of the Muslim population into rising up in arms; provided militants with weapons, communication equipment, training, logistics and safe havens and instigated localised armed uprisings. This is bolstered by trained military manpower and planning operations on foreign soil, helping in waging a proxy war in J&K.

The study does expound on the sectarian aspect of militancy in India in so far as Islam is concerned. However, it has shied away from the Christian influence on east Indian militancy, funding and foreign links. Similarly, the authors failed to discuss aspects of Hindu fundamentalism, which has also made its presence felt in the recent past. One final criticism lies in the study group's failure to trace and indict several Western states and their intelligence agencies who aspire to wield control on the Indian Union and their part in inciting militancy.

PAKISTAN

From the time of General Zia-ul-Haq, the state has been a self-appointed champion of Pan-Islamism, an international political movement advocating the unity of Muslims under one Islamic state, or Caliphate. Islamabad has co-opted the concept of jihad as an intrinsic part of its domestic and foreign policies. It has supported Muslim fundamental groups, some of whom acquired the form of quasi-official militias that facilitated state policies, for example, terrorist attacks against targets in India and Afghanistan and to execute its proxy war in J&K. These have been undertaken in great detail in the study.

Data provided on militant groups in Pakistan by the study is well presented and in substantial detail. Recruitment includes jihadist militants from Chechnya in the north to Bangladesh in the east to Kosovo to the west and the Islamic states in the Middle East and Africa. The final objective of most of these militant groups is 'to establish an Islamic state

in South Asia by inviting all Muslim-majority countries surrounding Pakistan'. Interim objectives include 'liberation of Kashmir' and 'enforcement of Sharia in Pakistan'.

Besides posing a major threat to the security of India, militancy in Pakistan, courtesy the state, acquired exceptional capabilities that it has turned on its sponsors and now poses a threat to the state. Consequently, Pakistan is in the throes of waging war using unbridled military means to eliminate recalcitrant terrorist groups running rampant in the country.

BANGLADESH

Militancy in Bangladesh has not received the attention it deserves. It is sandwiched between The Rohingya-Buddhist conflagration in Myanmar's Arakan ranges, unrest in Chittagong hill tracts, militancy to its northeast and north in India and the Maoist depredations on its east in India. Each has serious repercussions for the internal security of Bangladesh. Linkages with the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK and the involvement of British intelligence in nurturing elements involved with militant groups in Bangladesh have been excluded from this study.

CONCLUSION

'Militant Groups in South Asia' sums up militancy in South Asia: 'Nature of terrorism has changed. A quarter of century ago, it was regarded as a law and order problem, but now it is posing the biggest security threat to nation states. Almost all the countries of the world have been affected by terrorism. Today, terrorist groups are operating beyond the natural boundaries and are drawing support from many sources including the States in many cases. They have global networking with potential allies, other terrorist group, arms suppliers and have financial support from different sources.' It is a positive contribution to the growing literature on terrorism.