

India's Leading Role in the Counter-Terror Cooperation in South Asia

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ABSTRACT:

After decades of being a victim of terrorism, India has started leading the South Asia region in cooperation for counterterror measures. The menace of terrorism in this region is deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, political, ideological, and socio-economic conditions of the region. The Afghan War of 1980, along with the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan's arms support against the Soviet invasion, is the mother of the genesis of terrorism in this region. Due to the unorthodox way of partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 on religious grounds, Pakistan has been sponsoring terrorism in the Kashmir region of India. In the last 75 years, India has seen several of the worst cases of terror attacks on its soil by Pakistan-supported terror groups. The South Asian Region (SAR) has seen the maximum number of deaths due to terrorism compared to any other reason. Terrorism also poses a significant threat to the political stability, economic development, national security, peace and harmony of the region. This paper explores how India is trying to bring unanimity and cooperation among the South Asian nations in counterterror measures.

KEY WORDS: *India's Leading Role; Terrorism; SAARC; South Asia; Counterterror Measures*

INTRODUCTION

South Asia remains one of the most fertile grounds for terrorism and extremism in the world. The menace of terrorism in this region is deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, political, ideological, and socio-economic conditions of the region. The region comprises countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. These nations have seen the most brutal form of terrorism, insurgency and extremism over the last five decades or so. The Afghan War of 1980, along with the USA, Saudi and Pakistan arms support against the Soviet invasion, is the mother of the genesis of terrorism in this region (Chellaney, 2001). During that period, Pakistan became the ultimate destination of terrorists fighting for *Jihad*. However, once the Soviets left and the US turned a blind eye to the promises it had made to the *jihadi* fighters,

these elements established Afghanistan as the hub of terrorist activity. As a result, the attacks of 9/11 were propelled by logistical and moral support from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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Received	Reviewed	Accepted	Published
30-Jan.-2025	27-Mar.-2025	22-May.-2025	01-June.-2025

Volume	Issue	June	ISSN
No. 7	No. 1	2025	2583-1852(P), 2584-0878(O)

How to Cite this Article: Sahoo, Prasanta. India's Leading Role in the Counter-Terror Cooperation in South Asia. THE THIRD VOICE REALITY AND VISION. 2025. Vol No-7. Issue No-1. June. Pp: 7-13.
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17403217>

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Quick Response Code:



Available online at :
thirdvoice.voiceforvoiceless.in

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17403217>
Article No - TVRV00082

Due to the unorthodox way of partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 on religious grounds, Pakistan has been sponsoring terrorism in the Kashmir region of India. In the last 75 years, India has seen several of the worst cases of terror attacks on its soil by Pakistan-supported terror groups. Though after every terror attack since 2016 till the recent Pahalgam attack, India has successfully given a befitting reply to Pakistan with surgical strikes and military actions. Since the exit of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the terrorist groups, having transnational links, have wreaked havoc in the region. The fatalities in this region due to terrorism are second to none. According to several reports, the South Asian Region (SAR) has seen more deaths due to terrorism than for any other reason. Cross-border terrorism is a prominent feature of terrorism in this region, and states like Pakistan have sponsored a lot of it in their proxy war against India. No South Asian country is free from the scourge of terrorism, and terrorist groups in one country are inextricably linked to such groups in other countries.

Terrorism not only poses a major threat to national security, political stability, and economic development, but also to regional peace and harmony in South Asia. Due to the unique nature of the region, the nation-states of South Asia are interdependent in their security affairs, where one state's internal problem seriously affects other states and vice versa (Singh, 2002). Hence, cooperation in combating terrorism is not just desirable but imperative.

This paper explores how India, the most vibrant democracy, a military bull and an economic hub in the region, is trying its best to bring unanimity and cooperation among the South Asian nations. Especially since Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in Delhi, under the able leadership of Narendra Modi, in 2014, India has been claiming its leadership position in counterterror cooperation in the South Asian region.

HISTORY OF TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA

The South Asian region has enormous potential to develop into an economic hub. A demography of young people, fast-growing economies like India, countries with huge natural resource stocks, and a strategic geographic location regarding trade and transit routes characterise this region. Hence, any form of terrorism and violence hinders this growth and hampers the region's progress (Meng, 2024). Today, the whole of South Asia, from Afghanistan to Bangladesh, is going

through a phase of internal unrest and political upheaval arising from a range of factors such as ethnic conflicts, religious radicalism and fundamentalism, as well as powerful political divisions (Malik, 2012).

The truth is, Islam as a religion has occupied the position of the second-largest in the region. Unfortunately, there have been efforts made to establish the linkage between terrorism and religion in strategic thinking and foreign policy analysis. Also, it has been found that some states have used it politically to bargain with the neighbouring states. This has made the national security discourses more than a cancerous disease (Singh, 2002). Afghanistan and Pakistan have become a breeding ground for these extremist elements. This situation is further aggravated by the internal unrest and turmoil in countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar (Dasgupta, 2024). However, other categories of terrorism or insurgency are present in the region too, like ethnic terrorism as seen in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and North-East India; Narco-terrorism is also prominent in the SAR due to its proximity to the 'Golden Crescent' and the 'Golden Triangle' (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2025; CLAWS, 2019). The two regions are notoriously famous for the drug trade and terrorism emanating from state sponsorship, as seen in the case of Pakistan's proxy war against India.

History tells us that the South Asian region has been plagued by terrorism for decades now. The Afghan civil war and then the Soviet-Afghan war saw the region turn into an epicentre of *jihadi* ideology. Militia from all over the world joined hands in the region to fight a holy war, *jihad*. Pakistan's ISI and Jamaat have played a key role in converting them to real terrorists on the religious line through their training centres existing across the country. They have been motivating them and preparing them for the holy war for the survival of Islam (Liwal, 2010). The result has been a spill over of these militants to the entire region, including the countries that sponsored these terrorists in the beginning.

The SAR is plagued by some of the most radical terrorist organisations in the world. Terror organisations like Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Haqqani Network, the Islamic State Khorasan Province, etc., in Afghanistan; Tehreek-e-Taliban, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), are some of the numerous such organisations in Pakistan. There are also several terror outfits existing in Bangladesh, such as Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), Al-Qaeda, etc (SATP,

2025). In Myanmar, there are ethno-separatist terrorist groups like Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Arakan Army, etc. Finally, there are organisations like Indian Mujahideen (IM), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), etc., as some of the many terrorist organisations are active against India. The South Asian insurgencies, on the other hand, have their identity linkages at two levels: with the persons belonging to different countries but of the same identity, and with their compatriots settled in other countries as the diaspora (Muni, 2012). These identities work along the lines of ethnicity and religion (Mukherjee, 2021). The transnationalisation of terrorist groups has led to multiple terror funding sources, varied political and social support structures, and havens across boundaries. This mandates a common security perception from the region's countries (Wagner, 2020).

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE PAST COOPERATION

The South Asian region has a history of old civilisational linkages, but it has not worked particularly well in the case of counter-terrorism cooperation. It was in the Asian Relations Conference (1947) where the regional security perspectives were debated with an objective of developing a sense of interdependence among the nations of the Asia continent. More precisely, the socio-economic development and diplomacy, as well as to provide a basis for the formation of the 'Regional Security Community' among those nations (Thakur, 2018).

In the South Asia Region, the same perception and idea was taken as the sole motivation while forming the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. In 1987, the organisation, in its resolution, framed the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, which was unanimously supported by all the member states. India and Sri Lanka joined hands to combat ethnic tension in the Jaffna city of Sri Lanka, popularly known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Other such initiatives included the operation by Bhutanese forces against insurgents in its territory with the help of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Myanmar forces undertook various operations to flush out insurgent groups operating around the Indo-Myanmar border, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) Khaplang, the ULFA and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), active in Manipur. These SAARC nations conducted joint exercises with India during the 1990s to crack down on insurgent infrastructure. The Bangladeshi government

has sometimes taken action against such groups and insurgent groups of North-East India (Bhattacharjee, 2023).

In the wake of 9/11 and the GWOT, the world realised that borders cannot prevent terrorism from spreading. Hence, with India's proactive initiative, the SAR was prompted to tackle terrorism together. This was evident in the 11th SAARC summit of 2002, where all the members pledged to undertake collective efforts to combat terrorism. In 2004, an additional protocol was adopted along with the already existing SAARC's Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism to make it effective.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and *Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN)*, as subregional organisations, have also tried to achieve cooperation to combat terrorism in the South Asian region. In 2005, counterterror measures and actions against transnational crime syndicates were placed on the priority list of BIMSTEC. Shortly, a Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime was set up unanimously among the member states. However, SAARC remains the most prominent representation of the South Asian region.

CHALLENGES TO THE COOPERATION

Regarding counterterror cooperation, several challenges persist and hinder the complete elimination of terrorism in the region. Although it would be unfair to entirely disregard what has been achieved by the SAR countries, loopholes and challenges are still very much evident.

The definition issue becomes an obstacle to achieving uniformity in the position on terrorism. There is no universally accepted definition of terrorism (Schmid, 2023). This anomaly leaves the room open for interpretations and hence, fuels aberrations as argued by Ganor (2002), such as "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," which confuses the very definition of the term terrorism. This lacuna has been exploited by Pakistan in the case of Jammu and Kashmir by labelling terrorists and militants in the region as freedom fighters (Ganor, 2002). Similar behaviour has been observed in Nepal in the case of Maoists and in Sri Lanka in the case of native Tamils.

The idea of a regional security community gets thwarted by the inaction of Pakistan in addressing the terrorism emanating from its soil. It has been proven that Pakistan has used terrorism as a tool of state policy to carry out its dirty work and to sabotage its neighbours, especially

India. This was acknowledged by Pakistani President Musharraf in a speech in 2002 (DIA, 2002), later by President Asif Ali Zardari, and more openly by PM Imran Khan, as well as later by the Defence Minister of Pakistan, Khawaja Asif (ET, 2025). Musharraf very elegantly admitted that the Pakistani government in the past sponsored and nurtured terrorists through providing them with political and security support on its soil. The main objective was to use them for short-term foreign policy and political goals, particularly against India (Thapa, 2012). The attacks like 26/11 and 9/11 were also linked directly to Pakistan. Hence, such a state in the region instils insecurity and distrust among other countries and hinders cooperation.

Many eminent scholars argue that the SAARC has become dormant or dysfunctional (**Haque, 2025**). The continued issues between India and Pakistan owing to the latter's sponsoring of terrorism and the domestic issues in countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Afghanistan have rendered the organisation into a mere paper tiger. Afghanistan is being run by the Taliban, which itself is considered a terrorist organisation by many countries. On the other hand, Sri Lanka is going through an economic crisis, whereas Bangladesh has just witnessed massive social and political unrest. These developments impede the prospect of cooperation in combating terrorism.

Even though the countries of the SAR have agreed upon the need and the importance of combating each other at various summits of the SAARC and other regional bodies, as well as through bilateral channels, the commitment has not been backed by proper legislation (Kumar, 2012). These challenges expose the gravity of regional cooperation among South Asian countries in combating terrorism (Kurian, 2021). This propels everyone to consider India a key player in the region.

INDIA'S LEADING ROLE IN THE SAR

While looking at the political dynamics of the South Asia region, it becomes pertinent to understand a few things, such as the ideological and political compulsions of the countries. One of the main reasons is the Indo-centric nature of the region, where only India shares its borders directly and indirectly with all the nations. It is believed that any political or security upheaval that takes place in any country directly impacts India, including the security architecture of the region. Therefore, the matter of the success of the counterterror measures depends upon a deep cooperation of India with all its neighbours (Kumar, 2012). Another reason why India has become a focal

point in counterterrorism discussions is that India has been a primary victim of terrorism.

As one of the world's major victims of terrorism, India desires to be in the mainstream international coalition against terrorism. It wants to ensure the world community considers its security concerns and interests (Ramabadran, 2024). Terrorism in India has manifested itself in its various forms, including religious, ideological, cross-border and ethnic, and India has carefully worked around the goal of combating terrorism given its dominant religious nature. It has been argued by many scholars that India has to delink religion from its counter-terrorism strategy, presuming terrorists are a separate entity having no emotional relationship with any religion (Doval, 2007). Terrorism has to be dealt with an approach it deserves without having any religious bias.

India has tried to take each player into confidence regarding regional cooperation by building a solid bilateral rapport. The reality of working with an unenviable neighbourhood has shaped New Delhi's strategic choices. Initiatives like the "Neighbourhood First" policy of the Modi government make India's priorities evident (Haidar, 2025). India has established that South Asia's development depends on South Asia's stability. This stability is endangered by terrorism and extremism of any form. However, the seriousness of India's initiatives in this regard can be understood through discussing its bilateral understanding and cooperation with the neighbouring countries in the region.

INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Despite Pakistan's habitual offence of sponsoring cross-border terrorism in India and using terrorism as a tool of state policy, India has tried to resort to cooperating with Pakistan to combat terrorism multiple times in the past. In 2004, India and Pakistan agreed to restart the composite dialogue and cooperate to fight terrorism. In 2006, in Havana, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, on the sidelines of the meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, resolved to establish a bilateral Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism (JATM) (Thapa, 2012). Apart from this, India submitted a dossier as evidence of Pakistani involvement in the 26/11 Mumbai attacks to the Pakistani High Commission and even allowed a Pakistani investigation team to come to India to investigate the Pathankot Air Base attack in 2016. Later, they attacked Uri, Pulwama and recently at Pahalgam in Jammu & Kashmir (*The Hindu*, 2025). However, these efforts did not yield any success as Pakistan continues to harbour

and sponsor terrorists and use them against India as a weapon in its proxy war.

INDIA AND BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is home to numerous Islamic militant outfits (JMB, Al-Qaeda, Hefazat, etc.) and some insurgent groups that operate in Northeast India. Bangladesh is also plagued by economic disparity, social unrest and religious dogmatism, which makes it even more conducive for terrorism to thrive. Cross-border illegal immigration is a prominent issue between India and Bangladesh, which only exacerbates the threat of terrorism in the region. In addition, the porous nature of the Indo-Bangladesh border has provided a positive environment for the northeast militants to cross over to Indian territory and, when required, easily slip over to the Bangladesh side. (Kumaraswamy, 2007).

Hence, India has tried to seriously take up the issue of cooperating to combat these security challenges with Bangladesh. The then government at New Delhi had accused Dhaka of harbouring and sponsoring various militant groups, and it had presented Dhaka with a list of these militants' camps and demanded their closure. However, they continue to thrive (Kumaraswamy, 2007). However, with the Sheikh Hasina government, the cooperation seemed to deepen, as Bangladesh cracked down on north-eastern militants and ULFA leaders in 2009. The two countries have also established joint working groups for border management to tackle illegal immigration.

INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN

The recent Taliban takeover (2021) has mandated India to take a careful approach towards Afghanistan. Interestingly, without giving official recognition to the Taliban regime due to its national security, ideological and political compulsions, India has successfully established a solid rapport with it (Patil, 2023). India has followed the informal way to recalibrate its Afghanistan strategy to address the security threats spilling out from the soil of Kabul. India and Afghanistan have historical and cultural links between the two nations (Patil, 2023). The presence of a religious extremist government only exacerbates the *Jehadi* culture and ideology in the region, and India has carefully crafted its response to avoid the dissemination of this ideology in India, given a substantial Muslim population in the region.

INDIA AND MYANMAR

The Myanmar junta has often been accused of ethnic cleansing and violence in their country, including the

incidents of 2016-17, which resulted in the fleeing of 700000 Rohingyas from the Rakhine province to the neighbouring countries (UNHRC, 2024). However, India has diplomatically engaged with the junta, keeping its security concerns in mind. This is because cross-border insurgency in Northeast India is a pressing issue for India. These insurgents operate from across the border in Myanmar and often take shelter there when running from Indian security forces. Apart from this, illegal immigration from Myanmar, owing to its internal unrest, is a pressing challenge to Indian security. To address these challenges, India has taken joint efforts with Myanmar, culminating in military operations like the 'Sunrise' in 2019. India had conducted a military action like a surgical strike inside the Myanmar jungles (*The Hindu*, 2019). India has also agreed to contribute US\$25M over five years, starting from 2019, to reconstruct the violence-torn Rakhine state. These efforts speak of a serious cooperation effort from India.

CONCLUSION

The South Asian region has become a terrorist hotspot over the years, particularly the Afghan-Pakistan border area of West Waziristan (Liwai, 2010). The nature of terrorism in South Asia is transnational, and isolation will only prove to be detrimental for the regional players. India is rightly working towards creating a consensus among the establishment of the South Asian Regional Security Community on the 'Security and Prosperity' of the SAR. India has been trying to convince the people of SAR to consider the fight against terrorism as a common objective of the region, its governments and defence forces the regional prosperity and stability (Singh, 2002). The only way forward to combat this menace is cooperation and building a comprehensive regional strategy. A beginning has been made, especially after 9/11, to recognise that the way forward to combating terrorism requires cooperation from each country. However, it must also be recognised that using terrorism as a weapon is fatal to the very own country that harbours it, because terrorism is a dog that bites the very hand that feeds it, as stated by the Secretary of State, USA, Ms. Hillary Clinton, in a similar fashion (NDTV, 2011). Countries like Pakistan must work on this and improve their credibility.

In this regard, India has emerged as a key player in the SAR due to its robust economy, decisive leadership and strong ability to combat terrorism (Doval, 2007). This has been seen in the aftermath of the Pahalagam terror attacks (*The Times of India*, 2025). India has been leading the fight against terrorism in South Asia, owing to its

domestic experiences fighting the same and its larger vision of *VasudhaivaKutumbakam* (*The Economic Times*, 2024).

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS:

The author declare no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING:

The author acknowledges the support of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for this research through grant no. ICSSR/RPD/MJ/2023-24/OBC/30 Dated 22.12.2023 under the Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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