South Asia: Potential Hot-bed for global extremism?

Home to nearly 2 billion inhabitants, South Asia gathers a wide range of languages, distinct cultures and various religions. However large the differences might be, the nations in South Asia also share a common history. The exploitation of the region's differences has been a considerable factor in the successes of conquerors throughout history. The differences and historic commonalities are paradoxically also the main reasons for its complexities and sensitivities.

Issues like honour, language, caste and religion, which are perceived as small in the West, can become reasons for decades-long enmities which often go hand in hand with violence. Technology has played a large role in the accessibility of knowledge and bridging gaps between people, but it has proven to be a cause of polarization in South Asia, as it has adversely affected the collective tolerance levels.

Regional Conflicts

The region harbours many interrelated conflicts. Conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan, between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, between Pakistan and India over Jammu & Kashmir and water resources, accusations of Pakistani sponsored terrorism by Iran against their Shia community, destabilizing factors like insurgencies in Balochistan and Sindh inside Pakistan, forced conversions and Hindu ultra-nationalism. All these conflicts have the potential of becoming stimuli for clashes amongst countries, including large scale wars. This could, of course have a divisive impact on Euro-Atlantic security and security challenges in the region by targeting Western interests. History has proven that Western institutions and Westerners are vulnerable to terrorist attacks in the region. Air India flight 182 in 1985, the Mumbai attack in 2008, and the sudden calls for troop mobilization along the borders in reaction to terrorist attacks are some incidents in this regard.

On the other hand, contentions which are seemingly unrelated can fuel confrontations and influence opinions in separate countries and have recently proven to exacerbate religious extremism. The conflict between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar has incited elements from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to broaden the boundaries of their belligerency with religion being its only basis, which is further debatable.

Unprecedented, disastrous consequences await the region in case radical elements could manipulate any such event and impart it with a religious colour. All religions are manifestations of peace, humanity, and brotherhood. False and extremist interpretations of religion by nefarious elements in order to pursue and strengthen their political agendas, have erected walls of religious intolerance and hate in South Asia.

Constant malicious propaganda from both state and non-state actors has raised levels of distrust amongst the countries and their peoples. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has claimed responsibility for the barbaric attack of 16th of December 2014 in Peshawar on an Army school in which more than 140 innocent children were massacred. Yet, there are voices in Pakistan, including

Terrorist attacks in the US, London, Madrid and more recently Paris have exhibited that regional turmoil can spread like a disease to other places as well. Some extremists in Europe have shown to derive inspiration from successes of other extremists elsewhere and as such establish 'sleeper cells' which threaten the basic fundaments of democracy in Europe and pose serious challenges to security concerns that NATO and its members have. These 'sleeper cells' are known to have enjoyed psychological and military training in this region which has turned them into a formidable force to reckon with.

Afghanistan's Ongoing Security Challenges

The degree of hostility between Afghanistan and Pakistan should also be taken into consideration while planning for peace. Both countries have been engaged in blame-games on terrorist attacks, breaching each other's sovereignty and using proxy warfare. In the absence of immediate steps towards normalizing relations, it is anybody's guess to which level the relation between the two countries could further deteriorate.

The culture of the Afghans has always dictated them to fiercely oppose any foreign occupation. The advancement of education has lagged behind while combat techniques and tools have acquired new levels of sophistication in the past decades. Tribal allegiances form the basis for alliances and feuds while religious sectarianism further intensifies friction among the population. In case NATO would opt for a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, forces like the Taliban will exert their full strength to subvert the moderate forces in the country. This process would invite an influx of foreign extremists into Afghanistan and thereby further destabilize the fragile democratic institutions and aspirations. Reports of a presence of Islamic State terrorists have recently been confirmed by Afghan officials. This could seriously jeopardize NATO's operation Resolute Support, which demands support from the Afghan population and a peaceful atmosphere to be successful.

Jihad In the Region

In Bangladesh, the Jamaat-e-Islami and other radical organizations have been supporters of the policies of the Pakistani Army from the time it was still called East Pakistan. The prosecution of these elements by the heavily criticized Awami League has polarized ultra-nationalist and extremists' ideologies even further. This polarization and the fact that this is a Muslim-majority country have fueled dreams of local and foreign militants of turning it into an Islamic State by force. To this end, Bangladesh is already being used by radical elements as a sanctuary. At times, it has also proven to be a battleground for clandestine warfare in support of- and directed against terrorism by various regional state and non-state actors.

In addition to such unfortunate events, the Kashmir issue hangs like the sword of Damocles over the heads of the people of South Asia. This issue is one of the contentious ones which have obstructed trade, development, and cooperation in the region. It has already resulted in three wars between India and Pakistan. Religious radical elements have been exploiting the Kashmir issue which could have disastrous consequences in the future as global terrorist organizations have expressed their desire to expand their warzone into Kashmir as a new battleground. A peaceful solution to this issue which would be acceptable to all parties is an essential requirement for steps abiding peaceful coexistence.

On the whole, we cannot afford to underestimate the formidable infrastructure of terrorism in South Asia. The disturbing mushrooming of Madrassas in the region should certainly not be trivialized. The Taliban were born from one such Madrassa in Pakistan. There are tens of thousands of Madrassas in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh which only promote religious education based on the tenet of extremism. Individual donations, charity and at times monetary assistance from local government bodies are their source of income. Hardly any of the operations, finances or even curricula of these Madrassas are regulated.

Heavy funding of extremism is also done by high-net-worth individuals from the Middle East who strive to advance a radical interpretation of Islam among the 'Muslim Ummah'. Foreign funds are provided to Ahl al-Hadith organizations in order to promote the Wahhabi ideology in South Asia. These funds are used to build mosques and educational establishments which further strengthen this ideology at a grassroots level, distancing the people from their native Sufi traditions.

The regulation of Madrassas and introduction of mainstream education besides only religious education are immediate steps needed to curb the expansion of extremist religious ideologies. Simultaneously, a system of checks and balances on foreign funding and providing local financial alternatives is required to relieve South Asian religious organizations from their dependency on donations from the Middle East. There is also a need for a mechanism to regulate and regularize donations from Europe and America.

South Asia has proven to be a fertile land for religious extremism. The presence of militants from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Middle East, China and Europe bears witness to this notion. Many of these "foreign" militants are from time to time either arrested or killed in gun battles with security forces in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Kashmir. Their influx requires attention as it could aggravate the security challenges in the region. In support of the Islamic State, their flags have been waved and graffiti inscribed in some places. Factions of different terrorist organizations have declared their allegiance to them, like the Pakistani TTP.

Pakistan and Afghanistan, in cooperation with NATO, need to do more to take away these security concerns. As both Pakistan and Afghanistan are members of NATO's Global Partnership, these countries need to be strengthened while taking into account that it is a partnership that requires equal commitment and dedication from both sides. Recent history has proven that some influential players in these countries are either lacking or not willing to comply fully to the intended spirit of this engagement.

Potential For NATO's Role

Presence of NATO and other Western forces in the region has in many ways instigated perceptions which are anti-Western. This can be explained, as the ethos in South Asia does not appreciate formalized influence from the West regarding domestic polices and interests. Moreover, Western policies have failed to encourage engagement among regional powers in order to build a conducive atmosphere for a long lasting cooperation on economic and political fronts which could contribute to long lasting peace. Economic interdependency is key to the stabilization of South Asia. It will help demolish walls of hatred, eventually paving the way for favourable conditions to resolve long standing conflicts. The West can still play a significant role in facilitating engagement among countries in the region. To this end, NATO and EU could formalize policies in cooperation with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has been established to pursue the very objective of integration in South Asia. Subsequently this would create space for NATO's potential bilateral cooperation with these countries without disturbing the political and social equilibrium in the region. In the end, a strong and stabilized South Asia will inarguably satisfy any security concerns NATO might have.

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