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## INTRODUCTION

# Countering Insurgencies, Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South Asia

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South Asia continues to remain a hotbed of various forms of extremism. Indiscriminate violent terrorism with a strong religious overtone claims the highest number of victims, most notably in Pakistan and India. Islamist Jihad movements backed by external actors keep the state of Jammu and Kashmir on a boil. Globally inspired Jihad in search of a *shariah*-ruled state has recurrently raised its head in Bangladesh. Linkages with global jihad and movements that have rallied support to an anti-West platform have escalated their violence potential. They remain a threat not just to the region but have demonstrated an inclination to network with groups having a trans-regional agenda.

Beyond violent radical Islamist upheaval, there are insurgencies with secular political demands ranging from secession to varying levels of autonomy. The LTTE in Sri Lanka has been militarily defeated. The Maoists in Nepal have learned to be a part of the democratic process they rebelled against and yet have continued until recently to use terrorism as method of violence. In the Indian context, insurgencies continue in the northeastern region as do Maoist efforts in several of its states. In Afghanistan and Pakistan there is a proliferation of armed groups with transnational linkages. Notwithstanding the improved security situation translating into a decreasing number of violent incidents and fatalities, the ability of these armed groups to orchestrate violence remains a serious challenge. This is partly due to their continuous effort to innovate and also linked to the proliferation of capacity enhancement techniques by groups worldwide.

Commitment of inadequate resources, inappropriate force mobilisation, and lack of unified effort and political will to address the social and religious faultlines

are among the factors that have allowed the festering of armed groups, many of which have little to do with ideology and have generally degenerated into criminal enterprises.<sup>1</sup> Their capacity to achieve success—either in the form of a collapse of the state structure or replacement of it with their own models of governance—has remained limited, but they have survived through a variety of mechanisms, ranging from splintering to fracturing to temporarily lying low or exploiting peace deals to coalescing with other ideologically diverse groups.

The region minus Afghanistan has remained more or less on the backburner of global interest in insurgency and terrorism. Until Al Qaeda made inroads into South Asia and made the Afghanistan–Pakistan region the hub of its activity, the world's understanding of the region's extremism was limited. None of the radical movements here appeared to demonstrate any ambition for global expansion, nor did they seem interested in making Westerners in South Asia particular targets of their wars against the state. Even the indigenous separatist movement in Indian Kashmir was focused on a local jihad without necessarily linking it to the larger violent radical Islamist movement outside.

This has changed to a large extent since the arrival of AQ in Afghanistan, its eventual flight from there with Taliban to Pakistan as a consequence of the allied 2001–2002 assault, and the most recent addition of Islamic State (IS) as a player in South and South-East Asia. The increasing movement of South Asians to join the fight in Iraq and Syria; the invoking of the cause of global Islam for local acts; the increasing level of local radicalisation; and even the upsurge of IS flags waved in anti-India and pro-Pakistan protest movements in Indian Kashmir, all are some of the manifestations of this new reality. The yearning for integration between the local and the global ('glocal') is indeed reaching a peak, set amidst policy confusion regarding the nature of the threat. This underlines the importance of understanding the dynamics of extremism in South Asia, as well as the ongoing counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT) efforts. Lack of success in these is likely to have profound global repercussions.

Beyond these concerns, there looms the fundamental reality that South Asian states continue to privilege extremism and terrorism in their discourse and approaches when insurgency subsumes both. Regardless of its strategic approach, insurgency is a violent state-building project; i.e. construction of a new world, or counter-state, to challenge the existing world, normally embodied in a state or states.<sup>2</sup> It must be dealt with as such. Terrorism—the attack of the innocent by sub-state actors in pursuit of political objectives—is always one method in the insurgent project until such times as it becomes the project itself, its logic. Historically, insurgencies have sought to maintain a critical mass of popular support, whereas terrorism sought to survive 'structurally estranged from its purported mass or social base.'<sup>3</sup> Extremism informed the whole, but insurgency has always been a project of construction, even if its tools were violent, whereas terrorism as a strategic category has made violence itself the project.

It should be immediately apparent that the twenty-first century has brought about 'new war' in the sense that the so-called 'terror-crime nexus' has enabled insurgent groups to dispense somewhat with garnering popular support. FARC in Colombia is a prominent example. Nevertheless, the armed political contest at hand requires assessment of both sides of the equation. Regardless of funding sources, a failure of insurgents to mobilize popular support leaves the field open to the state to do so. This is precisely what has occurred in Colombia (the recent effort to privilege foreign advice, money and precision guided munitions notwithstanding).

To understand the changing character of insurgencies, the rise in violent extremism and terrorism, and state response, this volume brings together a number of case studies by experts with rich field experience in South Asia. Each of these essays provides a nuanced understanding of the strategies of the groups and responses of the states. A key question that this volume therefore addresses is whether successes and failures of the state can be understood in terms of their implementation of standard counterinsurgency doctrine.

Insurgency attempts to orchestrate attacks against all instruments of state power. Terrorism is invariably an important weapon in such a project. It may be put to many uses, seeking, on the one hand, systemic damage analogous to strategic bombing; on the other hand, merely to clear local space of human obstacles to insurgent expansion (e.g. a hostile teacher). The attacks may provoke a disproportionate state response, thus tipping the scales of legitimacy in favor of the attacker, especially for recruiting the newly abused—even as state miscues provide the material for threat strategic messaging function. The state is constrained to draw a fine strategy without playing into the hands of the challenge.

Legitimacy remains both a strategic goal and a strategic way forward. Brutal campaigns, with their impressive outward appearance and delivery promises, have hardly sufficed. South Asian examples bear testimony to that. This said, there is a need to recognize the existence of an alternative approach, illustrated by Russia in Chechnya and China in first Tibet, now Xinjiang: repression; in the extreme, 'kill them all!' This methodology, repugnant to any democratic society—which all states in South Asia are, even if imperfect—is on full display now in Aleppo, Syria. It has been adopted by none of the states considered and hence is not treated herein.

With this broad understanding, what counterinsurgency should actually consist of remains deeply contested. Douglas Porch, for instance, argues that counterinsurgency does not constitute a distinct form of warfare but merely a sub-set of minor tactics. Though most strategies swear by winning hearts and minds (WHAM), so-called population-centric warfare, Porch argues that this has seldom been a recipe for lasting stability.

Rather, historically counterinsurgency succeeded when it has shattered and divided societies by severely disrupting civilian life. In fact, COIN is a nineteenth

century legacy of empire whose uniqueness and impact was mythologized in its own day, and that is unlikely to prove a formula for strategic success in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

This would seem to miss completely the reality that the most convincing successes have come not in 'expeditionary COIN' but in local efforts which, ironically, have built upon popular incorporation and empowerment. The cases of Thailand, the Philippines, Colombia, and Peru come immediately to mind—even Nepal, if one focuses upon the 'long game.'<sup>5</sup> Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, in other words, as illustrated by this volume, are not exclusive acts engaged in by Western militaries.

### **Gaps in COIN research in South Asia**

Unfortunately, a majority of the studies of counterinsurgency in South Asia place primacy on military tactics or peacebuilding efforts and rarely on the trajectory of insurgency and the concomitant state responses (if any) to address the causes of such insurgency.<sup>6</sup> Some works of recent origin<sup>7</sup> are cross-cultural analyses across Eurasia and Afro-Asia to trace the roots of contemporary border disputes and insurgencies in South Asia. As a result, in South Asia, home to a large number of violent extremist movements and insurgencies, there is not much analysis of the CVE and COIN efforts. At one level, this is unsurprising as matters pertaining to national security are highly politicized and to a large extent bureaucratized (as witnessed in inter-departmental and inter-agency rivalry where information is not shared and at times even distorted) and thus remain closely guarded.

At another level, inadequate scholarship, often lacking rigor of field-based research, inhibits thought-provoking analyses that could aid policy-makers devise effective counter strategies. Moreover, there is very little in terms of methodological innovations in counterinsurgency studies and particularly missing is the ethnographic and anthropology of state studies. In the absence of close-up longitudinal studies, the field's contributions continue to recite a worn litany of complaints: states are not good at implementing tested COIN practices, use brute force, are not good at winning the hearts and minds, do not reform institutions to be adaptive, lack a finer capacity for gathering local intelligence, and so on.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the thought-provoking analyses on South Asian counterinsurgency have emerged from outside the region. Gates and Roy, for example, argue that states in South Asia will ultimately succeed against these various uprisings by use of force. The point reflects a widely held but a problematic normative view: that governments should use force to crush insurgencies.<sup>8</sup> C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly's edited volume addresses the relative lacuna in literature on the role of police in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>9</sup>

Whether South Asian states should replicate the models of the West and other parts of the world in dealing with insurgencies and terrorism or should evolve their own strategies has remained a matter of furious debate, but one that has been in a sense quite overcome in practice. The British effort in Malaya remains one of the popular sources of counterinsurgency approaches among many of the states in the region, even as the case itself is ill-understood.<sup>10</sup> Given that countries such as Pakistan and to an extent Bangladesh have been affected by transnational terrorism and that Islamist Jihad affects India and Pakistan, counterinsurgency approaches have followed a pattern similar to the West, using intelligence and force to suppress the extremists.

Yet, some of the following questions continue to remain unanswered, both at theoretical and an empirical levels. Is there a South Asian way of dealing with various forms of extremism? Are there unique counterinsurgency principles that set the region apart from the rest of the world? How are counterinsurgency doctrine/strategy arrived at? Does the reluctance to use or use of excessive force itself limit the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency strategy? How far have the failures to build efficient police forces affected counterinsurgency achievements? Have dialogue, peace talks, or negotiations been used as tools in the counterinsurgency strategy? Have there been any lessons learnt from previous counterinsurgency operations that inform the present strategy/doctrine? What new methodologies could a specialist researcher adopt in the coming years that will enrich field's contributions to policy?

The rather quick arrival of IS in South Asia has brought new complexities to attempts to understand the group's origin, growth, and recruitment pattern. This is fundamental, because IS, though an insurgency with a counter-state (presently under assault), seeks to expand on a global scale using methodologies once intra-state.<sup>11</sup> Not only does South Asia figure prominently in IS designs to establish a pure Islamic homeland for Sunni Muslims, several of its declarations seeking cooperation of South Asian Muslims through various channels have sought a practical march towards this goal. Some of these prominent declarations include that of the IS Caliphate in June 2014, the Wilayat Khorasan (Khorasan Province) in January 2015, and the 'Black Flags from the Islamic State,' released on 1 December 2015. These broad-based declarations have been supplemented by a number of videos, text materials, and messages by the outfit exhorting the Muslims of the region to rally to the movement.

The impact of all these, as revealed by the recent developments, has been troublesome. A large number of militants belonging to the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) factions in Pakistan have pledged allegiance to the group. In India, not only have a number of people joined the group or attempted to do so in its battles against the Syrian regime, but attempts have also been made by the IS recruits to carry out attacks on Indian soil. There, erstwhile members of the Indian Mujahideen (IM) have declared themselves as the IS recruitment arm. In Bangladesh, remnants of the radical Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) group have found

it convenient to launch a new phase of jihad against secularism under the IS banner. Finally, Afghanistan has witnessed increase in incidents of violence perpetrated by the group. The struggle for area domination between the various Taliban commanders and contestations with the IS and with dissident Taliban members joining the more radical IS group is adding to the complexity of the Jihadi landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It is no surprise that IS has been able to either tap into the feelings of alienation among Muslims and to use existing Jihadi outfits as vehicles for hire. In spite of the phenomenon being at least two years old, research on IS in South Asia remains in its infancy. For sake of convenience, commentaries have toed the official line, denying IS presence. Little attempt has been made to understand why a group operating in a distant land has been able to find appeal among the region's Muslims. Even the peacebuilding model of conflict analysis has stayed clear of analysing the sudden spurt of global jihad in South Asia.

Another area where scholars have paid less attention is analyzing counterinsurgency through the prism of decision-making processes in South Asian states. Much COIN analysis in the region has lamented the force-centric approaches of the governments against extremism and the apparent disregard for political intervention. However, the reasons for such preference have not elicited much scholarly attention. For example, why does India, a country where the military plays a subservient role to the civilian leadership, use force and fall back frequently on the army and the central police forces for conflict resolution? Why do some countries like Bangladesh allow the terrorists to carry out high profile attacks and use the incident as a tipping point for launching nationwide crackdowns? Similarly, while the Pakistan military's selective crackdown on the TTP and its affiliated groups has received some attention, the linkages between the deep state and groups like the Taliban and AQ still remain to be explored fully.

## **This volume**

This volume, in addition to addressing some of these research gaps, underscores the need for counterinsurgency practitioners in South Asia and beyond to systematically examine the changing character of intrastate insurgent movements.

It is imperative for political leaders and practitioners to understand the kind of war on which they are embarking.

If insurgency is an armed political campaign—mass mobilisation of a counter-state to challenge the state for political power—then it is intuitively obvious that counterinsurgency is intended to prevent this. As a strategic category, the goal of counterinsurgency is always legitimacy.<sup>12</sup>

It is ironic that 15 years since 9–11, the understanding of insurgency and terrorism in the West continues to be low. The effort to quantify has contributed mightily to this by confusing terminology (e.g. civil war defined as simply intense internal conflict) and conflating phenomena (the continued effort to claim that

it doesn't matter whether you face terrorism or insurgency is nothing short of embarrassing, not to mention deadly, if you are in the security forces). Finally, most analysts have been very slow to realize that 'kill them all' is back in force as a preferred and justified approach.

The lack of understanding of the changing character of insurgency and methods to be employed to deal with it is highlighted in Antonio Giustozzi's paper on Afghanistan, wherein the author highlights the inability of the Afghan security forces to contain an internally divided Taliban insurgency which was unable to coordinate its activities effectively in 2014–2015. The security forces steadily lost ground throughout 2015 and into 2016, but there had been little effort to develop an indigenous Afghan counterinsurgency strategy/-doctrine. A decade of international military intervention with number of foreign advisers has only contributed to divergent perceptions on what constitutes an appropriate counterinsurgency strategy. A string of Taliban victories has reportedly led to a state of urgency, although it remains unclear if and when the National Unity Government will be able to produce an approach that deals with a Taliban transition to maneuver warfare executed by regularized guerrilla units.

Examining the agents of insurgency that originated from Pakistan's tribal belt, Marvin G. Weinbaum traces the various campaigns and the counterinsurgency strategies that have been employed to contain and defeat militants. He elaborates the commonality between the violent extremism of Pakistan's Jihadi and sectarian organizations and the insurgents in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) in terms of root causes, as well as the drivers and pathways for recruitment. Social and peer pressure and material incentives help explain individual mobilisation. Both align in their rejection of the basic tenets of the country's democratic constitutional order and hence a willingness to use force if necessary to impose their vision of a political system compliant with *Sharia*. The state's counterinsurgency efforts, for apparent reasons of internal politics exacerbated by social division, have shied away from fully confronting Pakistan's insurgency on its Afghan frontiers and have failed to meet the security challenges posed by violent radical Islamist organizations. Weinbaum argues that mounting domestic violence and regional strategic calculations have forced many of Pakistan's military and civilian leaders to reassess state policies dealing with terrorism and domestic extremism more broadly, although effective implementation of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism policies remains a challenge.

Bibhu Prasad Routray, in his paper on Indian counterinsurgency grand strategy, argues that New Delhi's persistent failure in resolving some of its longstanding conflicts is linked to its inability to implement some of the more standard counterinsurgency practices. Extrapolating key rules of engagement from four success stories, the author concludes that diverse policies implemented as part of the country's counterinsurgency response in different theaters has produced sub-optimal results. The variation has become more acute with

different political parties in power attempting to implement their own models of counterinsurgency.

To the north, the continuity between Maoist insurgent use of terrorism in both insurgency and post-insurgency context is assessed by Thomas A. Marks. The 1996–2006 period of civil war has been followed by a 2006–2016 period of ‘unrestricted warfare,’ with the reintegrated Nepali Maoists giving up open warfare but continuing until recently to use terrorism as a weapon for shaping the political environment. The consequent straddling of war and peace astutely exploited the popular desire for peace. Throughout, violent rhetoric exhorted local Maoist cadre to execute violent acts against political opponents while simultaneously denying having actually ordered such attacks. Even a decision by the mainstream Maoist faction to finally reintegrate did not end the menace, as outraged splinters demanded that agreed upon strategies for urban struggle and terrorism be seen through to their conclusion, state power and social revolution.

To the south in Sri Lanka, the costly counterinsurgency effort is examined by Sameer Lalwani. He argues that even in—perhaps, especially in—cases of counterinsurgency that rise to civil war, resource mobilisation remains essential to explaining outcome. He engages closely with the military effectiveness literature, which has tended to favor strategic interaction theories over material preponderance. Lalwani demonstrates that in the Sri Lankan case, material preponderance accounts for variation in military effectiveness and campaign outcomes better than strategic explanations. Using a new quantitative dataset assembled on annual loss-exchange ratios, he highlights the superiority of materialist explanations above those of skill, human capital, and regime type. This article fills an important gap in the literature by explicating and weighing several dominant explanations for LTTE’s defeat after nearly three decades of increasing strength.

Anatol Lieven in tracing the recent history of counterinsurgency in Pakistan, argues that the Pakistani security forces have won their fight against the insurgency of the Pakistani Taliban, though terrorism will remain a serious problem for the foreseeable future. Victory was won not chiefly on the basis of new tactics but of the recovery of legitimacy for the campaign among the population and the armed forces. In Balochistan, the nationalist insurgency has been of a different form and weaker than that of the Taliban—but may prove long-lasting. He raises a number of interconnected questions with regard to the civil wars in Pakistan. Has the Pakistani experience been *sui generis*, or does it form part of wider patterns of success in counterinsurgency? As part of their campaign, did the Pakistani security forces develop a new doctrine of counterinsurgency or did they make things up as they went along? And in general, what are the lessons of the Pakistani experience for other countries faced with insurgency?

Examining Bangladesh, Shahab Enam Khan assesses violent homegrown groups that are now receiving support from global insurgencies—simultaneously ‘transnational terrorist organizations’—in particular the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. The new Jihadists are modern secular people, with modern political concerns, promulgating misleading versions of religion through online platforms, as well as more traditional proselytizing methods on the streets of Bangladesh. He argues that the complex nature of extremism in Bangladesh requires a comprehensive counterinsurgency effort that is immediate and prudent.

Samir Puri’s essay on Pakistan’s internal wars is based on the central argument that politics is critical to making sense of Pakistani successes and failures in dealing with non-state armed groups. This includes political currents, domestic as well as regional and the global impetus of the post-9/11 era. How these currents overlap highlights the complexity of any reading of insurgency in Pakistan. His essay argues that while the insurgency bordering Afghanistan has been an epicentre of Pakistani military efforts to fight the Taliban, this theatre is in of itself insufficiently inclusive to elucidate the nature of the Pakistan’s security challenges and necessary responses.

The essay by Namrata Panwar deals with India’s lesser known Naga insurgency and its fragmentation. Exploring the shifting role of public opinion and ethnic support for the peace talks, she attempts to ascertain whether prolonged peace processes can serve as a useful official tactic to weaken insurgencies while simultaneously making them subject to social changes and shifts in public opinion. State repression allows groups to remain cohesive whereas peace processes can reinforce pre-existing rivalries and bring internal dissension to the surface.

## Tailpiece

For analysts, a plethora of issues remain. Salient is the reality that the lifeline of all forms of extremism remains the nexus of ungoverned spaces; weak state and governance mechanisms; external state support for some groups combined with their capacity to elicit support from marginalized and alienated local actors; and transnational linkages with international terrorist movements that manifest themselves in the forms of flow of illicit finance and arms and regional criminal networks. Appropriate response to extremism therefore should address these force multipliers from which these armed groups benefit.

Yet, constructing an effective response to extremism has remained a key challenge for the countries of South Asia. State successes have at times been important but nevertheless limited. Regional counterterrorism (CT) cooperation has remained only partially successful. The difficult relationship between India and Pakistan inhibits a concerted South Asian response to extremism, although India’s bilateral engagements with other countries have been more successful.

In addition, even the in-house strategies to counter extremism have remained inadequate. Influence of external groups such as AQ and the IS has introduced further complexities in the South Asian landscape with global implications.

## Notes

1. Mahadevan, "The Maoist Insurgency in India," 203–20.
2. See Marks, "Counterinsurgency in the Age of Globalism," 22–9.
3. Ibid.
4. Porch, "The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Promise of COIN," 239–57.
5. All save Colombia are treated in Marks, *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia*; for that case, Ospina and Marks, "Colombia: Changing Strategy Amidst," 354–71.
6. Moeed Yusuf's edited volume *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Asia: Through a Peacebuilding Lens*, for example, considers the nature of intrastate insurgent movements from a peacebuilding perspective.
7. Roy, *Frontiers, Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies*.
8. Scott and Roy, *Unconventional Warfare in South Asia*.
9. Fair and Ganguly, *Policing Insurgencies*.
10. Particularly useful for its discussion of the complexity that existed within the British strategy is Hack, "The Malayan Emergency as Counterinsurgency Paradigm," 383–414; see also Shaw, "British Counterinsurgency in Brunei and Sarawak," 702–25.
11. Comprehensive discussion that places this methodology in violent radical Islamist context is Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State*.
12. See note 2 above.

## Disclosure statement

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