
SADF COMMENT

26 November 2019

Issue n° 160

ISSN 2406-5617

The Crime-Terror-Drugs Convergence in South Asia

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Comment submitted under invitation from SADF.

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Terrorist attacks occur infrequently, but the criminal economies that sustain them are enduring and structural. Since the latter are often embedded in wider processes of licit commerce, their eradication is more difficult than neutralizing a bomb-making cell. But this focus on operational, as opposed to diplomatic and financial, pressure against terrorist groups is short-sighted.

The convergence between crime, terrorism and drug trafficking poses an enduring threat to South Asia. Readers may ask: why segregate ‘crime’ from ‘drug trafficking’ when they are part of the same phenomenon? The answer is that government officials deal differently with the two kinds of offences, potentially offering economic leverage to terrorist groups even within a seemingly hostile policy environment

Drug traffickers, by exploiting weaknesses in border security and police surveillance, commit offences against the state. This makes them vulnerable to concerted counter-action. In order to operate on a large scale for any length of time, they require connivance from high-level patrons and/or low-level corrupted officials. Without this, they cannot guarantee the safe passage of consignments internationally. Because of global sanctions, the trafficking of drugs is essentially a rich man’s game. It is different from cultivation and distribution, both of which are localized activities. Drug trafficking is a type of top-down crime.

Kidnapping and extortion, on the other hand, are not crimes against the state but rather crimes against individuals. They do not require

complicity from law enforcement personnel, merely state incapacity mixed with bureaucratic indifference towards private suffering. They are a bottom-up form of criminality which has low-entry barriers; a poor man's version of organized crime. The distinction is important, because it suggests the following dual hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: that acts of domestic terrorism— being a way of opposing state machinery – are primarily funded by activities related to kidnapping and extortion, in addition to voluntary donations. Such activities erode the state's monopoly on violence and weaken its legitimacy.

Hypothesis 2: that acts of cross-border terrorism – being a form of covert warfare – would be logistically enabled by drug traffickers, with tacit approval from one or more governments. Cross-border attacks need to be 'plausibly deniable'; i.e., even if the identity of the sponsoring state is well-known, no international sanctions are imposed as long as the sponsor refuses to admit culpability. Supervision by intelligence agencies and cooperation with local proxies are instrumental for such an outcome.

These two hypotheses are borne out by an analysis of terrorism as originating within Pakistani territory – and from Pakistan to the international sphere. The Pakistani military and its civilian marionettes have long pursued an ambivalent policy towards terrorism: uncompromising against some groups and complicit with others, while always insisting that no distinction is made between 'good' and 'bad' terrorists.

Selective counterterrorism

Islamabad's words do not match its actions. A review of Pakistani media reports over more than 25 years, conducted by the author of this paper, suggests that the military and intelligence establishment have a highly selective approach on counterterrorism. The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' terrorists has actually been around for over 26 years. It was best explained by a prominent columnist in 1993, who observed that responses to terrorism differed according to the victims (Abbas, 1993, p. 64). If these were foreigners or members of ethnic and sectarian minorities, then terrorists who solely targeted such victims were considered 'good'. They were not aggressively pursued by the state apparatus.

If, on the other hand, terrorists attacked the security establishment itself, particularly the army, they were labelled 'bad' and relentlessly hunted down. This differential treatment explains why Pakistan has not convicted the organizers of the 2008 cross-border attack on Mumbai, which killed 165 people. And why Pakistan's judicial system acquitted the mastermind of a 1988 domestic massacre that killed 250 members of the Muhajir minority. In both cases, justice was denied to victims and their families. Yet, in its handling of 'bad' terrorists, the Pakistani state has no compunction about using death squads and custodial killings. Journalists critical of the army, as well as Baluchi and Sindhhi nationalists, have been subjected to all manner of human rights abuses. This dichotomous approach towards militancy, based on who the victims are, can be explained with reference to two factors.

The first relates to the terrorist group's organizational structure. As the scholar Milos Popovic has explained, organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which carried out the 2008 Mumbai massacre, have a centralized command system (Popovic, 2015, pp. 919-937). They are built around a personality cult that exercises strict control through a bureaucratized machinery. It is therefore easier to identify and weed out 'rogue' elements, ensuring that the only combat activities undertaken are those pre-approved by the Pakistani military. Whether in Afghanistan or India, Lashkar-e-Taiba conducts cross-border attacks overseen by the S Directorate of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence.

Pulitzer-prize winning author Steve Coll, in his book on the S Directorate, claimed that Western agencies recorded real-time conversations between serving ISI officials and the Lashkar-e-Taiba gunmen who attacked Mumbai (Coll, 2018, p. 343). British authors Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark went further, alleging that the attack was a joint operation between Al Qaeda, the LeT and the S Directorate (Scott-Clark and Levy, 2017, p. 374). They also suggest that Osama Bin Laden's refuge in Abbottabad was facilitated by retired ISI personnel and funded by Lashkar-e-Taiba (Ibid., p. 431). It is important to note that Lashkar-e-Taiba is an Ahle Hadith organization, ideologically similar to the strain of militant Islam espoused by Al Qaeda. The LeT is thus distinguished from the majority of Pakistani terrorist groups, which follow the much larger Deobandi school. This means the organisation is relatively isolated and totally dependent on state protection from international counterterrorism initiatives. It is a very obedient proxy. By contrast, those organizations that are

labelled as ‘bad’ terrorists are less centralized. Their junior cadres, left to rely on their own devices, are more inclined to attack off-limit targets in order to raise their personal visibility.

The second factor which determines whether a terrorist organization is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ relates to its main source of funding. In Pakistan, Islamist militias with a domestic agenda have since the 1990s been infiltrated by career criminals. The latter evade arrest by aligning with socially respectable causes. Even so, they are merely street-level hoodlums. They lack the deep scriptural knowledge needed to become political ideologues, as well as the government contacts needed for high-value/high-volume trafficking. They cannot break into the top ranks of the underworld. Whatever skills they have are sufficient only for localised criminal activity, such as abduction or assassination. Thus, due to a lack of better options, domestic terrorists substantially self-finance their operations through crime.

Cross-border terrorism on the other hand, is more widely resourced. Lashkar-e-Taiba conducts public fund-raising through charitable front organizations (Mir, 2005, pp. 65-71). It launders money through private businesses and receives overseas donations. Most importantly, it benefits from governmental grants ostensibly handed out for social work. Hence, its links with criminal elements do not need to be primarily financial. Rather, what LeT seeks is logistical assistance for long-distance strikes, which it obtains through opportunistic partnership with trafficking networks, while retaining its own ideological focus.

The instrumentalization of crime

An example is its ties with the Indian-originated drug lord Dawood Ibrahim. Ibrahim has been designated by the US government as a financier of Al Qaeda. New Delhi and Washington have identified him as residing in the Pakistani city of Karachi. In September 2001, a local newsmagazine ran a cover story about his presence in the city. It commented on the impunity he enjoyed due to the ISI’s patronage (Hasnain, 2001, p. 28). The magazine suggested that the ISI was using Ibrahim’s criminal network for espionage against India. For merely acknowledging his presence on Pakistani soil, the reporter who filed the story was detained by ISI agents. He was only released after signing an undated suicide note (Hasan, 2004, p. 32).

Within South Asia, Dawood Ibrahim represents the strongest example of a drugs-terror convergence. In 1993, 19 members of his network travelled to Pakistan. They were trained in weapon-handling and bomb-making. Subsequently, they carried out synchronized bombings in Mumbai, killing 257 people. When arrested, they revealed that military-grade explosives had been shipped by Pakistani traffickers to international waters. From there, Ibrahim's boats had transported the material to India (Zaidi, 2002, pp. 49-62). After his involvement was exposed, Ibrahim fled to Pakistan, where he remains.

Dawood Ibrahim is far from the only drug trafficker protected by the ISI for geopolitical ends. As detailed by the American journalist Gretchen Peters, the ISI has allied with drug traffickers since the Soviet-Afghan War (Peters, 2009, pp. 37-39). Its purpose has been to pressure Kabul to accept the Durand Line, the disputed frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as a formal border. Meanwhile, on the Punjab border with India, ISI officials have colluded with drug traffickers to cache arms and explosives on Indian territory. The purpose seems to be to create an infrastructure for urban terrorism, which can be activated by sleeping agents in the event of a war. Indian police reports from the 1990s reveal a pattern of collusion between Pakistani traffickers, terrorists and spies, with the city of Lahore serving as an operational hub. The ISI plays a supervisory and adjudicatory role, guaranteeing immunity to traffickers as long as they assist terrorists in moving weapons and drugs into India. This is similar to what some other intelligence agencies, who serve semi-authoritarian regimes, are thought to do in various parts of the world.

Need for multilateral cooperation and unilateral action

Given South Asia's complicated realities and the near-impossibility of finding cooperative solutions when one country persists in sheltering terrorists, perhaps one should look to extra-regional measures for solutions. Clearly, whatever terrorism takes place on Pakistani soil is no-one else's problem to solve. Extortion and kidnapping are local issues caused by poverty that is partly rooted in endemic corruption, as well as a general lack of policing capacity. They cannot be mitigated by supplying hardware to the Pakistani army. In any case, the world does not owe Islamabad the favour of neutralizing terrorists who challenge Islamabad's own authority. Nor does Islamabad do anyone else a favour by periodically restraining and then unleashing cross-border terrorists to wreak havoc in Afghanistan and India.

Rather than succumb to strategic blackmail, it might be helpful for the West to signal to Pakistan that failing to prosecute international terrorists and drug traffickers would worsen its economic situation. Some might argue that such a step would be counterproductive, by adding to the institutional fragility of the country. This objection is a false one, because fragility has been caused by the army's interference in politics, a constant factor that has endured through both strong and weak economic performance. Isolating Pakistan's economy would contain the striking power of international terrorist organizations that use trafficking networks for operational purposes.

In order to diminish the threat of cross-border terrorism in South Asia, it is necessary to go after the individuals who sustain it. These entities are largely distinct from those which engage in domestic terrorism. Merely relying on interstate goodwill will not be enough. Multilateral and unilateral action will be required so as to weaken terrorist organizations. For the latter, countries with extensive counterterrorism operational experience in the region, such as the United States and India, must cooperate more closely.

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