

RESHAPING THE WORLD'S RESPONSES TO THE TERROR MATRIX

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The Taj Hotel, in November 2008 | Photo Credit: PTI

The world has been witnessing a flurry of meetings and conferences on the issue of countering terrorism worldwide. The list resembles an alphabetic soup, viz., meetings of the United Nations Security Council [Counter-Terrorism Committee](#), the [No Money for Terror Conference](#), and an [Interpol Conference](#) in which terrorism figured prominently. The recurring theme has been the need to wage a coordinated fight against terrorism. Nothing much, however, seems to have changed. India and Pakistan, for instance, among the most affected by terrorism, have continued to hurl invectives at each other instead of finding ways to cooperate to deal with the terrorism menace. Much of the world is continuing on their paths. None of this augurs well for the fight against terrorism.

An oft-repeated comment is, hence, worth recalling, viz., history is most relevant when it comes to ensuring a proper understanding of threats such as terrorism, which have a long-term impact. While there appears to be a lull as far as major terror incidents are concerned, it must not be lost sight of that it was as recently as at the beginning of this century that the world witnessed several landmark terror attacks. Two that stood out were the September 11, 2001 terror attack in New York, and the November 26, 2008 attacks on multiple targets in Mumbai. Both in their own way reflected the kind of paradigmatic changes that were taking place in the practice of violence. Both had profound strategic implications. The 9/11 attack heralded what came to be regarded as 'new age terrorism', while Mumbai underscored the dangers of state-sponsored terrorism. With these attacks the cognitive map of terrorism had changed.

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This was confirmed by the series of major terror attacks that took place in 2015-16. The attacks on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris (January 2015) and on the Bardo Museum in Tunis (March 2015), were followed by the one in Istanbul (in which several were killed, in 2016) There was also the attack in Paris again, in November 2015 (in which at least 130 were killed, signalled not only the emergence of 'new age' terrorism but also the rise of new terrorist entities such as the Islamic State (IS) and the al Qaeda — each with their own caliphs.

During 2016, the IS launched several more spectacular attacks (some with its allies) across Asia, Europe and North Africa. The intensity has since declined to an extent, but this is offset by

indications of new complicated patterns of relationships among various terrorist conglomerates. It has provided a fillip to many fringe extremist organisations that nurse a terror mindset. Hence, it would be wise for those in authority to heed the warning that terrorism could well prove to be the defining threat of not merely the present, but to future generations as well.

Terrorism remains the omnipresent threat that it has always been. The locales may shift but the threat remains. While Europe and Asia remain in the cross hairs of different terrorist groups, Africa and northwest Asia appear to have become the main hunting ground of the al-Qaeda and IS terrorists. Linkages among terrorist groups, have if anything, become strengthened, and evidence of this was forthcoming very recently when al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri (successor to Osama bin Laden) was identified as living in Kabul in a 'safe house' maintained by the Haqqani Network (which has ties with Pakistan's intelligence). Zawahiri was eliminated in July 2022 in a U.S. directed 'Hell Fire' missile attack while he was still in Kabul. All this confirms, if confirmation was required, that al-Qaeda has both an advocacy and an advisory role, vis-à-vis, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

What is also becoming evident is that al-Qaeda's activities in particular are becoming more decentralised. It is finding fertile grounds in the Sahel region of Africa and in Eastern Africa, apart from its salience in Afghanistan. Among the al-Qaeda's firmest allies today is, undoubtedly, the Taliban. The Haqqani Network within the new Taliban government provides many an opportunity for al-Qaeda to find greater traction across the region.

The belief that the growing ambit of terrorist activities was the primary reason for the recent spate of meetings on terrorism would, however, be misleading. Very little seems to have been discussed at these meetings on how to deal with the spate of newer terror groups, i.e., groups apart from al-Qaeda and the IS, whose ambit of activities had widened and become more widespread. There is again no indication that the meetings took stock of the fact that ideology intertwined with religious extremism had become an even more potent threat than previously. Instead, it would seem that the terrorist 'handle' had become a useful ploy for many governments to drum up support for their various initiatives, without much substance to their declarations.

Many of the past problems still remain. The declining level of serious terrorist incidents do not, however, translate into a decline in terrorism. No doubt, today's scaled-down attacks of little known targets do not attract public attention. But as in most other fields of human endeavour, it is the small incidents that portray what could happen in the near and the not too distant future. It would be unfortunate if counter-terrorism experts across India were not to read proper meanings into many recent terror attacks, such as the one in Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu) and Mangaluru (Karnataka) attacks. The incidents may appear relatively insignificant, but are symptomatic of growing radicalisation and suggestive of the fact that a sizeable base is being built in the southern region, which could lead to the creation of organisations on the model of the Indian Mujahideen (of the early 2000s). Constant and careful vigil by counter-terrorism experts is needed to keep track of not only these activities but also the kind of links that are being established (under the radar) by global terrorist outfits whose presence is not as widely advertised as that of al-Qaeda and the IS.

Hence, what is most needed by world leaders, at one level, is not to accept all declarations of a decline in levels of terrorism at face value and, at another level, not to treat some terrorists as good and others as bad, based on each nation's predilections. The next step is to reactivate the proposal for the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) that has been languishing in the offices of the UN (since India first proposed this in the 1990s), and finalise the list of items needed to check terrorism globally. Acceptance of the CCIT would send signals far more potent than empty platitudes by world leaders at global conferences on the need to defeat

terrorism. Once the CCIT is accepted by the UN, the war on terror would gain a new salience.

Additionally, counter-terrorism agencies the world over need to hone their skills and capabilities on how best to counter 'new age terrorism'. There is also a clear need for counter-terrorism agencies across the world to function in a more coordinated manner, exchanging both intelligence and tactics. They need to take stock of the newer patterns of terror such as 'enabled terrorism' and 'remote control terrorism', viz., violence conceived and guided by controllers thousands of miles away, positing the dangers of Internet-enabled terrorism. Counter-terrorism experts will again need to enlarge their expertise to accommodate multi-domain operations, and undertake terror 'gaming', all of which have become essential in today's day and age.

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