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Before and After 9/11: Indo-U.S. Counterterrorism Cooperation

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Abstract

Coined during the French Revolution to describe “the reign of terror” between 1793-94, the term “terror” originated from the Latin word “terrere,” which reflects frighten or tremble and had positive connotations (Bolz et al., 2002). Today, terrorism has transformed into a more menacing specter by adopting new techniques and using advanced mass media communication and technology. Moreover, terrorism has become a political as well as a legal and military issue that the international community cannot afford to ignore. The United States, India and the entire world community have long been struggling with the continuing threat of terrorism. Both India and the United States have been victimized by international terrorism from groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for a long time. Therefore, the need of the hour is to enhance cooperation in counterterrorism, and progress towards intelligence sharing, information exchange, operational cooperation, counterterrorism technology and equipment. The aim of this paper is to analyze India-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation as it stands today and examine how both countries are uniquely suitable for enhanced counterterrorism cooperation. Given the mutual interests and common threat, the current international security environment directly affects both nations and there is a need to focus on long term prospects of cooperation for a better relationship. Additionally, the paper will also delve into the origins, evolution and current level of Indo-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation. As a tentative case study, this paper will also examine the terrorist attack of 9/11 as a turning point in the India-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation prospect.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, Cooperation, Military, Intelligence Sharing.

The bilateral relationship between India and the United States has transformed into a “bilateral strategic partnership” based on respect for democracy, pluralism, and rule of law as well as shared concerns on bilateral, regional and global issues. The advent of globalization led to the emergence of non-traditional security threats, including organized crimes such as: trafficking in women, children and drugs; climate change; money laundering; and especially the emergence of international terrorism and radicalization as the most potent weapons of disturbing the sovereignty of states. Apart from terrorism, the fear of weapons of mass destruction has also prompted the U.S. government to cooperate with India in order to tackle these threats at a global level. Both countries clearly condemn all the acts, methods, and practices of terrorism as criminal and unjustifiable, whatever the political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other reasoning used to justify them.

Thus terrorism has been a common concern for both countries and they need to develop a conscious strategy to fight it together. The increasing terrorist attacks on sovereign soil, specifically the 26/11 (2008) Mumbai attack and the 9/11 (2001) terror attack in America have prompted the two countries to work together to counter regional and global terror threats (Rotella, 2011). The difficult tasks of tackling terrorism have become more difficult than ever for governments. Despite the general convergence of Indo-U.S. views on containing terrorism, the two nations have not been able to cooperate extensively on the issue (Curtis, 2009). This is partially due to reluctance against deepening intelligence ties from the Indian side and to U.S. bureaucratic resistance against elevating counterterrorism cooperation beyond a certain level (Haniffa, 2009). But Curtis (2008) argued that “the gravity of the threat posed to both countries from terrorists in the region require New Delhi and Washington to overcome past suspicions and recognize that they both stand to gain considerably from stepping up their cooperation” (Curtis, 2008).

The mistrust between the two countries and their divergent geopolitical perceptions have also proved to be a hurdle in the way of improving counterterrorism cooperation. New Delhi is suspicious of U.S. policy towards Pakistan over the issue of Kashmir, believing that the former has provided training, financing and military and logistical support to wage a separatist war in Kashmir (Ibid). In the wake of growing Islamist militancy in the form of ISIS, there is a need for stronger bilateral intelligence sharing at the official level, and increased cooperation and security in the realm of cyberspace. Maritime defense can also be one of the potential areas of mutual counterterrorism cooperation among the two countries.

Terrorism Trends in India

India has been facing the menace of terrorism for a long time. It was ranked as the 7th most terrorism-afflicted country out of 163 other countries in 2015. According to the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database (GTD) from 2000-2015, a total of 7,835 deaths were recorded in India related to terrorism, which comes to an average of 489 deaths per year (Global Terrorism Database, 2016). India is known to be an ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse country that has dealt with numerous attacks from separatist, secessionist and religious extremist groups over the past three decades. These include: a Sikh uprising in the state of Punjab in the 1980s, a Muslim separatist movement in the state of Jammu and Kashmir from 1989 to the present, and various ethnic separatist movements in the northeastern states (Jamwal, 2003). Apart from this, the challenge posed by leftist-extremist movements (Maoist and Naxalite) in the rural areas of eastern and central India is also a matter of grave concern (Curtis,

2008). Furthermore, a new kind of internal security threat has emerged in the form of the radicalization of a particular section of the population by terrorist groups and organized criminal networks. These terror outfits have propagated extremist ideologies and continue to pose serious challenges to India's internal security prospects (Subramaniam, 2012). The homegrown terror groups have links with transnational terrorist groups that are often based in neighboring countries. Such local elements of chaos have added a new dimension to the country's terrorism problem, like the Punjab and Kashmir problem, which had strong domestic political variables influencing, fostering and metastasizing domestic discontent into terror. The flawed election in Jammu and Kashmir and the creation of Bhindranwale by the then-existing government to check the Akalis in Punjab illustrated this scenario. The strong mass criticism and growing concern over increasing terrorist attacks on Indian soil has forced the government to reassess its approach towards countering terrorism.

Indo-U.S. Counterterrorism Cooperation Before 9/11

India and the United States have both been facing the problem of terrorism and both countries have been cooperating on counterterrorism for years. The first Indo-U.S. conversation on the issue of combating international terrorism started under the U.S. President Ronald Reagan's administration during the Cold War era. Initially, U.S. assistance in capacity building was provided through aviation security aimed at preventing hijacking. This has since expanded to cover other areas, such as the forensic examination of explosive devices (Raman, 2010). Though Washington had taken a few steps to assist India with the Sikh insurgency in the 1980s, more U.S. support was provided on issues of counterterrorism in the mid-1990s. The United States started facing Islamic terrorist threats soon after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and these threats manifested in the form of U.S. nationals being targeted by these groups. Among such attacks were: the bombings of the World Trade Center in 1993, the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the bombing attack on the USS Cole in 2000.

A series of dialogues between the officials of the two countries were held after the kidnapping of six western tourists in Kashmir in 1995. But the first instance of Indo-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation was seen in 1996 when the United States banned the fundraising activities of Sikh terrorist organizations that were operating in the United States. The general perception of counterterrorism analysts at the time was that the full potential of bilateral cooperation on Sikh terrorism could not be realized due to the political influence of the Sikh community in the United States (Nayak, 2010). In 1997, the two countries signed a landmark U.S.-India extradition treaty, which led to the U.S. extradition of Sikh militants wanted in India. Since then counterterrorism cooperation has evolved as an important aspect of Indo-U.S. bilateral ties. However, both countries came closer after the hijacking of Indian Airline Flight 814 on 24 December 1999. In the aftermath of the incident, a Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism was established in January 2000 that was aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts worldwide. The first meeting of the Joint Working Group was held in February 2000 followed by a meeting between the U.S. Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott and the Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in London. The Indian government agreed to the U.S. offer of anti-terrorism assistance programs. They agreed that the Joint Working Group should continue to meet regularly and become an effective mechanism through which both sides could share experiences, exchange vital information, and intensify their cooperation in combating terrorism. In the light of above discussion, it is clear that both India and the United States have a

mutual interest in strengthening a regime aimed at countering international terrorism. Such a convergence of interests provided an ideal platform for a rich, enhanced cooperation between the two countries (Pillai, 2000). The Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism provides a multi-disciplinary approach to counterterrorism cooperation and reviews the progress of the cooperation periodically.

Indo-U.S. Counterterrorism Cooperation After 9/11

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center changed the definition and manner in which the world viewed terrorism. Soon after 9/11, the U.S. security setup changed and Afghanistan and Iraq were pounded by U.S. soldiers. Following the 9/11 attacks India offered substantial support to the U.S. through the course of their counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan. For the first time in history the Indian Army offered its military base to the United States. The military base was not allowed even to the USSR, which was considered a close Indian ally during cold war (Ashley, 2005). Before the commencement of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), India provided satellite imagery of Afghanistan to the United States. Furthermore, the Indian Navy also contributed by escorting vessels carrying cargo for military operations through the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea.

At the diplomatic level, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited the United States to reaffirm India's support on counterterrorism cooperation. This visit paved the way for deeper intelligence sharing between the two countries, with New Delhi providing much more strategic assistance pertaining to the Indian Ocean and South Asian regions.

During the visit leaders of both countries issued a number of policy statements jointly on the scope of counterterrorism cooperation. Both the leaders highlighted a joint statement on 9 November 2001 (U.S. Department of State, 2001). The statement remarked that,

Since September 11, the people of the United States and India have been united as never before in the fight against terrorism. . . . They noted that both countries are targets of terrorism, as seen in the barbaric attacks on September 11 in the United States and on October 1 in Kashmir. They agreed that terrorism threatens not only the security of the United States and India, but also our efforts to build freedom, democracy and international security and stability around the world. As leaders of the two largest multi-cultural democracies, they emphasized that those who equate terrorism with any religion are as wrong as those who invoke religion to commit, support or justify terrorist acts. . . .

President Bush and Prime Minister Vajpayee agreed that success in this endeavor would depend heavily on building international cooperation and securing the unambiguous commitment of all nations to share information and intelligence on terrorists and deny them support, sustenance and safe havens. The two leaders agreed to consult regularly on the future of Afghanistan. They welcomed the measures outlined in the UNSCR 1373 and called on all nations to ratify and implement existing UN Conventions on counterterrorism. They expressed support for India's draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism and urged the resolution of outstanding issues to enable its adoption by the UNGA. . . .

Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Bush agreed that developments in Afghanistan have a direct impact on its entire neighborhood. They emphasized that the Taliban and

the Al-Qaida network have turned Afghanistan into a center of terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking and have brought immense suffering to the Afghan people. They agreed that a peaceful, progressive, and prosperous Afghanistan requires a broad-based government, representing all ethnic and religious groups, friendly with all countries in the neighborhood and beyond, as well as sizeable and sustained international assistance for Afghanistan's economic reconstruction and development. The two leaders committed themselves to work together, and in partnership with other countries and international organizations, to achieve these goals.

Another high-level visit was made by Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Defense Minister George Fernandes in January 2002, which was followed by the meeting between Foreign Minister Jaswant Sinha and U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. The U.S. secretaries of state and defense, along with the other top U.S. officials, made visits to New Delhi in 2002. Numerous high-level exchanges took place in 2003 (Kronstadt, 2003).

The Joint Working Group has met five times between 2000-2002, reflecting the importance that both sides attach to international cooperation in combating terrorism. The past year has been a watershed for the two democracies in confronting the challenges of terrorism. During this period, India and the United States have accomplished quite a lot through their counterterrorism cooperation; in a joint statement (U.S. Department of State, 2002), the group stated the two countries have:

- Broadened their exchange of information and assessments on the international and regional terrorist situation;
- Strengthened intelligence and investigative cooperation;
- Qualitatively upgraded and expanded anti-terrorism training programmes for Indian law enforcement officials;
- Signed a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty;
- Launched a bilateral Cyber Security Forum, with a wide-ranging program of action to address cyber-terrorism and information security;
- Introduced military-to-military cooperation on counterterrorism to supplement the initiatives of the India-U.S. Defense Policy Group in this area;
- Worked together closely on multilateral initiatives on terrorism, including the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1373;
- Initiated dialogue and cooperation on issues such as homeland/internal security, terror financing, forensic science transportation security and border management; and
- Taken concrete steps to detect and counter the activities of individual terrorists and organisations of concern to the two countries.

Additionally, the group initiated discussions between the U.S. Technology Support Working Group and its Indian counterpart on India's needs, including but not limited to counterterrorism equipment and technology tools, necessary for enhancing border management.

One more important initiative—established after the 9/11 attacks—was the U.S.-India Cyber Security Forum, which held its first meeting at New Delhi in April 2002, and the second at Washington, DC, in November, 2004.

The first meeting of the U.S.-India Cyber Security Forum recognized the increasing interdependency between India and the United States in the information technology arena. Cooperation between the United States and India is of growing importance as U.S. government and corporations utilize information technology companies in India at a rate of about \$9 billion annually. "As this trend increases, it is crucial that our governments and private

industry work together to ensure an environment for secure transactions, networks, and software development,” stated the U.S. State Department Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr., the U.S. head of delegation. During the conference, the United States and India reaffirmed their commitment to cooperating on securing cyberspace by establishing five joint working groups and identifying action plans for each. Future efforts will include workshops in New Delhi and Washington and scientific exchanges. Representatives of private industry also identified areas to strengthen and enhance cooperation (Embassy of India, Washington, DC, 2004).

During the second meeting of the U.S.-India Cyber Security Forum, both government and industry representatives from each country convened to identify areas for collaboration in combating cyber-crime, cyber security research and development, information assurance and defense cooperation, standards and software assurance, and cyber incident management and response (U.S. Department of State, 2004). During the meeting underlining the importance of this proposal in counterterrorism cooperation, a press statement issued in November 2004, at the end of the second meeting of the forum, said:

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman emphasized that the U.S.-India Cyber Security Forum “holds great promise for future cooperation.” The Indian Head of Delegation, National Security Council Secretariat Joint Secretary Arvind Gupta, delivering a statement to the Forum on behalf of J.N. Dixit, India’s National Security Advisor, said that “Securing cyberspace will remain one of the biggest challenges facing the international community for years to come and this Cyber Security Forum has emerged as an important bilateral mechanism to address such issues” (Ibid).

In September 2016, both the countries held the fifth U.S.-India Cyber Dialogue in New Delhi and discussion revolved around ways to increase bilateral cooperation on a wide range of cyber issues and strengthening the U.S.-India strategic partnership by (as the document states):

- Exchanging information on cyber threats and issues of mutual concern, and discussing possible cooperative measures;
- Promoting bilateral cooperation on law enforcement and cybercrime issues;
- Creating a mechanism for cooperation, including setting up appropriate sub-groups;
- Affirming common objectives in international cyber fora, especially the application of international law to state behavior in cyberspace, the affirmation of norms of responsible state behavior, and the development of practical confidence-building measures;
- Confirming support for the preservation of openness and interoperability, enhanced by the multi-stakeholder system of Internet governance; and, Confirming support for the preservation of openness and interoperability, enhanced by the multi-stakeholder system of Internet governance; and,
- Coordinating cyber capacity-building efforts, including testing and standards with respect to cyber security (U.S. Embassy and Consulates in India, 2016).

With the re-election of President Bush, a major breakthrough emerged in the U.S.-India relationship. In July 2005, President Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued a Joint Statement resolving to establish a global partnership between the United States and India through increased cooperation, including exchanges of law enforcement best practices, joint military training exercises, and joint approaches in relevant international fora (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

In 2006 President Bush paid a three-day visit to India to discuss means for further strengthening the bilateral “global partnership” (Kronstadt, 2007). The need for cooperation and

enhancing ties to achieve a global partnership, greater bilateral counterterrorism cooperation and a stronger military partnership that includes defense sales has been periodically repeated by U.S. officials. The undersecretary of state, Nicholas Burns, reiterated the need for stronger Indo-U.S. relations in an article published in 2007 in the *Washington Post*, and called for “two more giant steps” that must be taken to achieve it (Burns, 2007).

After the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack, India and the United States signed the Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative (CCI) in July 2010 in order to deepen collaborative efforts, and intensify exchanges (The Hindu, 2010). This agreement is reflective of the determined effort made by the two governments towards combating terrorism and ensuring the citizens’ security. These efforts included the exchange of law enforcement practices, reciprocal visits of senior-level officials to discuss lessons learned, the conduction of joint military training exercises, and the joining of forces in the international community on key counterterrorism issues (The White House, 2010). The Indian government was granted access to David Headley, an American national who confessed to participating in planning the 26/11 2008 Mumbai terror attack (Kronstadt, et al., 2010). Apart from this investigation, assistance was also provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) personnel in the 2006 Mumbai bombing attack and the 26/11, 2008, terror attack. The FBI also reported having unprecedented access to evidence and intelligence following the latter incident, after interviewing some 70 individuals, including the only surviving attacker, Ajmal Kasab. The United States know-how in preserving and analyzing forensic evidence was also shared with Indian intelligence officials. FBI forensics experts later provided in-person testimony to the Indian court trying Ajmal Kasab as well (Kronstadt, 2012).

In November 2010, a Homeland Security Dialogue was inaugurated by President Obama during his India visit to further deepen operational cooperation, counterterrorism technology transfers and capacity building. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano subsequently travelled to India in mid-2011 and met with then Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram, as well as representatives of private industry, in an effort to promote bilateral counterterrorism and law enforcement cooperation (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Another round of this dialogue was held in May 2013, with six sub-groups steering cooperation in specific areas. Agency to agency engagements are being fostered on a wide array of relevant issues, including counternarcotic, counterfeit currency, illicit financing and transnational crime, infrastructure security, transportation and trade, coastal security, and large-city policing (Kronstadt, 2012). In 2015, police commissioners from India paid a visit to the United States to learn the practices of megacity policing.

Meanwhile, in September 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the United States on the invitation of President Obama, three months after forming his government. The visit was followed by President Obama’s visit to India between 25-27 January 2015. He became the first U.S. president to be the chief guest at the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi. The two leaders issued a joint statement which envisioned the U.S.-India counterterrorism relationship in the 21st Century (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s second visit to the United States in September 2015, another U.S.-India Joint Declaration was issued on combating international terrorism (The Indian Express, 2016).

A breakthrough development on counterterrorism cooperation occurred in 2016 during the prime minister’s second visit to the United States. Through a joint statement, both the leaders reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening cooperation against terrorist threats from extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, Daesh/ISIS, Jaish-e Mohammad, Lashkar-e- Tayyiba, D Company

and their affiliates. They intended to do so through deepened collaboration on UN terrorist designations. Further, they directed their officials to identify specific new areas of collaboration at the next meeting of the U.S.-India Counterterrorism Joint Working Group (Government of India, 2016). The leaders also applauded the finalization of an arrangement aimed at facilitating the sharing of terrorist screening information. They also called for Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai and 2016 Pathankot terrorist attacks to justice (ibid). India appreciated the U.S. designation of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen leader Syed Salahuddin as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. This act was seen as evidence of U.S. commitment towards ending terror in all its forms. In this spirit, the leaders welcomed a new consultation mechanism on domestic and international terrorist designation listing proposals (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017).

The new Trump Administration in the United States seemed unclear on how it would engage with India on certain issues. But in a telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in February 2017, President Trump referred to India as “a true friend and partner in addressing challenges around the world.” In March, the Indian National Security Advisor Ajit K. Doval visited the United States, met U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis, Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, and the National Security H. R. McMaster. The main agenda of the meeting was the “expansion and deepening of India-U.S. co-operation in collectively addressing the challenge posed by terrorism in South Asia.” Both sides also discussed a wide range of regional security issues including maritime security and counterterrorism. The leaders also reiterated their commitment to working together as partners to “combat the full spectrum” of terrorist threats, affirming that both great democracies would stand together in the fight against terrorism (Indian Express, 2017).

The first face-to-face meeting held between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi took place in June 2017. The meeting was dubbed as a success because the United States affirmed India’s role as a crucial and natural partner over collateral issues of counterterrorism, regional security and international peace. Prime Minister Modi said that the challenges arising out of terrorism such as extremism and radicalization should be tackled with utmost priority. Both leaders also emphasized the need for destroying the safe havens of terrorists (Hindustan Times, 2017). In this spirit, the leaders welcomed a new consultation mechanism on domestic and international terrorist designations listing proposals. They further called on Pakistan to expeditiously bring the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai, Pathankot, and other cross-border terrorist attacks to justice. These attacks were perpetrated by Pakistan-based groups and swift action was recommended to counter the growing specter of radicalization. The leaders also announced increased cooperation aimed at preventing terrorist travel and disrupting global recruitment efforts by expanding intelligence sharing and operational-level counterterrorism cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). They welcomed the commencement of the exchange of information on known and suspected terrorists for travel screening. They further resolved to strengthen information exchange on plans, movements and linkages of terrorist groups and their leaders, as well as on the raising and moving of funds by terror groups. An important step was taken in the form of affirming support to the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism that will advance and strengthen the framework for global cooperation and reinforce the message that no cause or grievance justifies terrorism. They also pledged to work together towards preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems and towards denying access to such weapons by terrorists and non-state actors (ibid).

Conclusion

The relationship between India and the United States has been transformed into a global strategic partnership based on shared democratic values. The region of South Asia has been vital to U.S. interests in the 21st century. Thus India, a dominant regional actor, could not be ignored by U.S. foreign policy makers. With growing economy and manpower, India has been characterized as a nascent and natural partner of the United States. In the wake of emerging trends in global terrorism it is in the interest of regional and global security that both India and the United States should make efforts towards immunizing the menace of terror. Though India has long been victimized by terrorism, it was only after the 9/11 attack on U.S. soil that the former's plea was acknowledged at the global level. The attack on the World Trade Center changed the manner in which terrorism was viewed by the international community. In the aftermath of this attack India showed its sincere support to the war on terrorism. Since then both countries have developed close ties on counterterrorism cooperation. After the 26/11 Mumbai attack, the United States expressed congressional desire to improve coordination between the two countries to combat terrorism and advance international security. Subsequently, the United States provided a great deal of assistance in the investigation through technical know-how of combating terrorist threats. It also helped in the trial of Ajmal Kasab and granted India the authority to try U.S. national David Hadley in the same case. During 2014-15 there have been many declarations and joint statements issued on counterterrorism cooperation besides military and naval joint exercises. Despite the convergence of concerns, there are still divergent geopolitical perceptions on both sides that hamper counterterrorism cooperation efforts. In the last decade, one of the most serious threats to have emerged around the world is the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This radical and extremely violent terror outfit presented an unprecedented challenge to the security and sovereignty of each and every state. Thus the need of the hour is to sustain current cooperation and work together on more capacity building and effective counterterrorism mechanisms in the future as well.

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