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Avoiding Unnecessary Radicalization in Bangladesh: Learning from Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Experiences in FATA

Ryan Clarke and Clint Lorimore

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The recent incident involving the mutiny and possible infiltration of the Bangladesh Rifles by a terrorist group has raised concerns among security experts that Dhaka may be considering changing its current approach to dealing with terrorist groups by adopting a military-led strategy instead of maintaining its current policy of engagement through police and intelligence action. This brings front and centre the classical debate over police versus military action in combating terrorism. Before adopting such an approach it would be wise for the Bangladeshi government to examine Pakistan's counter-terrorism experience in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas in order to avoid unnecessary radicalization in the country.

Use of Police Versus Military Action in Combating Terrorists

Pakistan's counter-terrorism experience in the country's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where the government, while under tremendous American pressure, chose to rely on large scale military operations to pursue terrorist groups did more to exacerbate the issue of radicalization in the region than it did to solve the problem. In late 2003 and early 2004, Pakistan engaged in air and artillery strikes in FATA against a host of terrorist organizations, inflicting considerable civilian casualties. These actions provided impetus for groups there to adopt more violent tactics. Considering Pakistan's experience, Bangladesh would be wise to maintain its present policy of engaging terrorist groups through the paradigm of police and intelligence action and avoid calls for a change in tactics following the mutiny of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR).

Terrorism's Parallel Paths in Bangladesh and Pakistan?

Bangladesh's "militant cycle" has lagged behind Pakistan's and as such, Dhaka has the rare luxury of being able to avoid counter-terrorism pitfalls by observing Pakistan's experience with the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ). LeJ is a Pakistani terrorist group founded in 1996, which was initially very narrowly focused on the targeting of Shi'as in the country. However, not long after Pakistan mounted military operations in FATA, Pakistan witnessed the use of suicide bombings by LeJ, a tactic which the group

had not previously been known to engage.

Bangladesh's experience with terrorist groups such as Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harakat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B) in some ways parallel that of Pakistan and their dealings with LeJ prior to the use of military operations in FATA. HUJI-B and JMB claim to be fighting against the fundamental secular tenants of the Bangladeshi state on the grounds that it is an apostate system inherited from the British. JMB has exceptional organizational skills which were demonstrated when the group carried out 463 bombings throughout Bangladesh in the space of one hour in 2005. JMB information operations and propaganda videos are beginning to emulate those produced by other international terrorist groups, suggesting that Bangladesh's terrorist outfits are very much attuned to regional and global developments. This is something that must be taken seriously by Dhaka considering the evolution of terrorist strategies in Pakistan.

Radicalization and the Adoption of Suicide Terrorism

There is no single path to radicalization, it can however be argued that individuals and groups move toward further radicalization if they feel that they are victims of political oppression or have been on the receiving end of harsh government treatment. Pakistan's adoption of a military-centric approach to tackling terrorism in FATA did exactly this. Conflicts in which the tactic of suicide terrorism is used are asymmetric in nature with the targeted opponent maintaining superior capabilities and resources. The implementation of suicide terrorism as a strategy is often a measure of last resort, with heavy handed military action and its accompanying collateral damage serving as a catalyst in generating the emotions of hate and vengeance which are required in suicide terrorism operations. Revenge is a strong factor in suicide terrorism as was demonstrated in one study which found that close to half of Palestinian suicide bombers committed their attacks shortly after having lost someone close to them. Subsequently governments should avoid engaging in actions which would increase the likelihood of vengeful acts.

Suicide terrorist attacks are often aimed at democracies due to the fact that they are viewed as being more susceptible to such acts of coercion than other types of governments. Such a strategy is one of coercion used to pressure a change in policy of governments by signaling that there will be further attacks if their demands are not met. Therefore in the case of Bangladesh it is vital that the government recognizes the error of relying on large-scale military action which could facilitate a radical transformation of the country's terrorist groups. At present, the threat of suicide terrorism in Bangladesh is low as Dhaka continues to view the issue through a law enforcement and intelligence paradigm. However, if the government was to alter its approach, the tempo of radicalization among terrorist groups in the country could increase.

Learning Regional Lessons – Bangladesh

While the BDR mutiny has sparked fears that Bangladesh's terrorist groups are scaling up their terrorist campaigns, the government must not cave in to any future public pressure to engage in a military-led crackdown on their strongholds. So far Dhaka has been wise in viewing terrorism through a police/law-and-order paradigm as opposed to an erroneous military-centric one. Calls for military involvement could, if implemented, actually increase the support base of HUJI-B and JMB, alienate potential local allies, and cause an unnecessary escalation. Such a turn of events will lead to further radicalization in the country and may bring about even more violent tactics on the part of the terrorist groups. If Bangladesh is to turn the tide on terrorist groups and ensure that the problem remains manageable, Dhaka must maintain its present course of relying on police and intelligence action while avoiding the pitfalls of large-scale military operations.

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