WMD TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA: TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS RASHED UZ ZAMAN

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since that fateful September day when terrorists struck New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington DC terrorism, particularly terrorism brought about by weapons of mass destruction (WMD), has become the buzzword in international relations jargon. As the United States embarked on a long-term, comprehensive campaign to fight global terrorism, South Asia, too, began to experience the fall out of the scourge called terrorism. Since September 2001, this region has had its fair share of terrorist acts, worsening an already delicate political situation. Experts and analysts have added their words to the hype surrounding the concept of WMD terrorism and many a grim picture is being painted about the likelihood of WMD terrorism striking new targets.

This paper will attempt to analyse the likelihood of such terrorist acts being carried out in South Asia. To assess the chances of this region experiencing such traumatic experiences, I shall very briefly describe the concept of weapons of mass destruction terrorism, the causes of the rise in such terrorism, who might use it in future and the possibilities of such acts being carried out in South Asia.

UNDERSTANDING WMD TERRORISM

While hundreds of definitions of terrorism are present in the literature, only two characteristics are critical for marking out terrorism from other forms of violence. First, terrorism is aimed at non-combatants. This distinguishes it from fighting in war. Second, terrorists use violence for a dramatic purpose usually to install fear in the targeted population. This deliberate use of dread is what differentiates terrorism from simple murder or assault.1

Jessica Stern defines terrorism as an act or threat of violence against non-combatants with the objective of exacting revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience. WMD terrorism involves the most modern and the most extreme forms of random violence. Nuclear,

chemical and biological weapons are inherently terrifying; in most cases of their being used, the fear they would cause would dwarf the injury and death. This dreadful nature creates its own dangers; if victims panic and try to flee, they may spread contamination and disease still further. These weapons are also inherently indiscriminate. The very nature of these weapons makes it impossible to aim at a particular target and only the most sophisticated militaries can use them in open areas without putting non-combatants in danger. Lastly, the effects of these weapons are also inherently random. The radius of injury depends on conditions that are impossible to control or predict with certainty.

The movement of aerosols, the virulence of microorganisms, the susceptibility of victims, and the spread of fallout all depend on exogenous variables like meteorological conditions and terrain. These weapons' fearinspiring all-encompassing, unpredictable nature is what makes them consummate instruments of terror.2

WMD TERRORISM: REAL DANGER OR FALSE ALARM?

Now that we have some idea about the nature of WMD terrorism, let us turn our attention as to why the likelihood of these weapons being used is increasing. Five interrelated developments have increased the risk that terrorists will use chemical, biological or nuclear weapons against civilian targets. First, such weapons are especially valuable to terrorists seeking to conjure a sense of divine retribution, to display scientific prowess, to kill large numbers of people, to invoke dread or to retaliate against states that have used these weapons in the past. Terrorists motivated by these goals rather than traditional political objectives are increasing in number.

Second, terrorist's motivations are changing. A new breeds of terrorist –including ad hoc groups motivated by religious convictions or revenge, right-wing extremists and apocalyptic and millenarian cults– appear more likely than terrorists of the past to commit acts of extreme violence. Religious groups are becoming more common and are more violent than secular groups.

Third, with the break up of the Soviet Union, the international black market now offers weapons, components and know-how. The Soviet nuclear-security system was designed during the Cold War to prevent Americans from stealing secrets, not to prevent theft by insiders. And that inadequate system has largely broken down. Hundreds of tons of nuclear materials, the essential ingredient of nuclear weapons, are stored at vulnerable sites throughout the former Soviet Union, guarded only by underpaid, hungry and disheartened people.

Fourth, chemical and biological weapons are proliferating. Some governments, including China, Russia and North Korea, are exporting equipment that, while ostensibly intended for benign purposes, could be used to manufacture WMD. The situation in Iraq shows how difficult it is to prevent the proliferation of WMD. Preventive war did little to root out Iraq's

WMD programme and the most intrusive inspection regime ever devised (now defunct) has left UN inspectors guessing, especially about Iraq's biological weapons programme.

Fifth, advances in technology have made terrorism with WMD easier to carry out. For example, the Internet allows terrorists to recruit from a larger pool of potential sympathisers and to communicate instantaneously. Advanced fermenting equipment makes it easier to optimise the growth of biological organisms and new technologies for coating microorganisms make dissemination less difficult.3

Despite these alarming developments, terrorists' use of WMD has until now been, fortunately, rare. Although the 11 September attacks resulted in a huge number of casualties, it was not caused by WMD but by terrorists using conventional means. While many of us tend to be carried away by the resulting hype about the imminent probability of super-terrorism taking place, voices are being heard that question the notion about the inevitability of terrorists resorting to such acts. While not denying the likelihood of such an event happening, these analysts seem reluctant to agree with the assumption that such events will become the trend in future. It is to these arguments that we now turn our attention.

Critics who question the likelihood of WMD terrorism seem to be especially doubtful about terrorists using nuclear weapons to pursue their aims. Terrorist production and use of a functional nuclear weapon remains a controversial question with a number of writers describing such an occurrence as a low probability event or an overrated nightmare.4 Karl Heinz Kamp particularly seems to be unwilling to accept the fact that terrorists might use nuclear weapons.5 Gavin Cameron joins him and argues that although knowledge about the theoretical design of a crude nuclear weapon is easily attainable nowadays, actually building such a device is extremely difficult even for rogue states let alone terrorists.6 argues that the likelihood of any state, even a rogue one, turning over nuclear weapons for terrorists groups to use is also unlikely as terrorists might just turn these weapons against the He also downplays the threat of loose nuclear weapons from the former Soviet Union falling into terrorist hands, arguing that technical built-in safeguards and selfdestruct mechanisms would make the weapon's use very difficult. Finally, Cameron asks the question as to what the terrorists suppose they could achieve by threatening or actually using a nuclear weapon. Give the destructive capability of such a weapon and its disparities with terrorists' aims, it seems nuclear terrorism is very unlikely to occur in future although it cannot be entirely ruled out.

But what about terrorists resorting to the use of other weapons of mass destruction, namely, radiological, chemical and biological weapons? Surely, chances of them being used by terrorists of the future are very high. Not likely, argue the critic. For one thing, chances of WMD terrorism arise when a terrorist group fulfils three criteria simultaneously: it must be capable of acquiring and using such weapons, it must be interested in mass-murder, and it must be willing to use such weapons to achieve it.7 But it is very difficult for terrorist groups

to fulfil these requirements all at once. Chances are that terrorist groups might be discouraged from using these weapons because of the very nature of the weapon. Using chemical, biological and radiological weapons is extremely risky and, in spite of the advances made in recent years, still technologically daunting. Even a small mistake could wipe out the entire terrorist group. At the same time mass casualties can be inflicted without using these weapons, allowing the terrorists to avoid the special stigma attached to their use. The increasing lethality of conventional means of destruction acts as an incentive for terrorists to prefer them to weapons of mass destruction.8

It might appear that the above constraints do not apply to many of the new breed of terrorists emerging in the world arena. They seem to be genuinely interested in WMD terrorism. This particularly holds true for ad hoc terrorist groups or amateur terrorists, which are unusually well organised, disciplined and ruthless to avoid being penetrated by law-enforcement and intelligence agencies.9 But analysts who study these groups believe that such groups or individuals would have difficulty acquiring or using them successfully. It seems that there is a negative correlation between psychological motivation to indulge in such violent acts and the actual ability to do so. The psychological make-up of such individuals or groups is often incompatible with the technical and organisational requirements for acquiring and using such weapons.10 The example of Aum Shinrikiyo lends credibility to such observations. Not only did a well-funded, technologically capable group failed to carry out its attack but also in the process they showed how their psychological make-up was not conducive for such undertakings. Richard Falkenrath has identified various reasons for this situation. First, cutoff from the isolated world, working in an environment governed by an erratic leader like Asahara, constantly hounded by the fact that failure could mean death, it was easy for members of the group to lose touch with reality. Second, a self-selection bias may exist in people who join these groups. Those alienated enough from their work and from larger society to seek such an escape may be too prone to fantasy to make sound judgements in the laboratory. People who do stay in these cults or groups and are willing to build chemical and biological weapons to achieve mass destruction may be mentally unsuitable for good scientific work, and especially with the practical planning and engineering that go into making workable delivery vehicles.11

Any discussion about the likelihood of South Asia facing WMD terrorism must keep in mind the above-mentioned constraints that have prevented the world from experiencing such acts until now. It is true that terrorism in South Asia has its own dynamics but that does not necessarily mean the use of such weapons is inevitable. I shall now discuss the situation in South Asia and try to identify the real danger which terrorism can bring for the region.

MAPPING TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA

Facing mounting terrorist violence, Asia already accounts for 75 per cent of all terrorism casualties worldwide.12 With the world's fastest-growing markets, fastest-rising military

expenditures and most serious hot sports coupled with a toxic stew of boiling religious, political, ethnic, strategic and historical animosities, made all the more volatile by endemic poverty, illiteracy and the sheer agony of daily existence, Asia holds the key to the future international security order. Much of Asia's terrorist violence is concentrated in its southern belt, which in the past decade emerged as the international hub of terrorism. This southern part of Asia, encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Chinese ruled Xinjiang and Tibet, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, is wracked by terrorist, insurgent and separatist violence in a manner unmatched elsewhere in the world. The number of annual fatalities in terrorist-related violence in South Asia far exceeds the death toll in the Middle East, the traditional cradle of terrorism. To be sure, the entire expanse from the Middle East to South East Asia is home to militant groups and troubled by terrorist violence posing a serious challenge to international and regional security.13 But this rise of militancy and terrorism in South Asia is a recent phenomenon and can be linked to the Afghan war of the 1980s. In that covert US war against the Soviet Union and a series of Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan, the USA chose Afghan religious extremists as their allies. Hand picked by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency from among Pakistanbased Afghan dissidents and refugees, trained by the Pakistani military and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and given generous US military assistance, the Mujahidin (Holy Warriors) waged a jihad against the government in Kabul and its Soviet allies.14

During this period, the CIA also recruited thousands of volunteers from states in the Middle East and North Africa -including Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen- to join the Mujahidin. Motivated by religious zeal and the sight of fellow Muslims fighting against the mighty Red Army, these volunteers eagerly underwent military training and joined the jihad. Thanks to these men, and to the heroism of the Mujahidin and the Afghan people and also to the Stingers, Western and Muslim money, the Red Army, the most powerful military force on Earth, was stopped and turned back. The Afghans won the war but lost the peace. Jealousy, tribalism and the lust for power very soon replaced the holy war. It was a demoralising spectacle; humankind at its lowest ebb; politics as usual. Disgusted by the bloody mess in Afghanistan, many Mujahidin turned their attention outside Afghanistan. A year after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, rebellion erupted in Indian held Kashmir. The explosion in Kashmir was spontaneous, but there is no doubt the Islamic victory in Afghanistan ignited the new Intifada. Muslims across the world were elated, emboldened and made proud by the victory over Soviet Union in Afghanistan by Islamic faith and ardour, many Muslim reasoned, they could just as well liberate themselves from oppressive regimes, the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon, Indian misrule in Kashmir, Catholic oppression in the Philippines, or Russia's brutal repression of the Caucasus.15

As the Afghan war veterans took their war outside Afghanistan, the security of the United States, several Muslim states, the Philippines, China and Russia came under pressure. But many thought the greatest impact of the movement of these men was felt in South Asia. India particularly began to identify itself as bearing the brunt of the terrorist acts perpetrated by Islamic militants. Indeed Pakistan has been identified by many as "waging a war by proxy in Indian-held Kashmir through Islamic militants."16 Pakistan itself has been wracked terrorist acts brought about by religious extremism and the drug trade, both a fall-out of the Afghan war. The grenade attack on an international Protestant Church during Sunday service in

Islamabad's diplomatic enclave in 2002, last year's Bahawalpur Church tragedy, incidents of targeted killings of minority Muslim sects, all have the mark of religious intolerance of an excessive kind and bodes ill for Pakistan.17 Indeed religious extremism and terrorist acts associated with it are on the rise in South Asia and shaking the fragile political scenario.

But, though religious inspired terrorist acts are on the increase in the region, it remains to be seen whether such terrorists resort to weapons of mass destruction to bring about their desired goals. The constraints that have prevented other terrorists groups, including Aum Shinrikiyo, from indulging in such acts and mentioned previously in this article also applies for religious terrorist groups operating in South Asia. Moreover we have to remember terrorism, even religious terrorism, is not apolitical in nature and such terrorist acts are influenced by political considerations, no matter how vague or obscure they might appear to us.

Andrew Bacevich argues in a similar vein in his article 'Mr Clinton's War on Terrorism.'18 To Bacevich, terrorism represents the continuation of politics by other means. Terrorist acts are driven by political objectives. The prevalence of terrorism in the era of globalisation undoubtedly proves the persistence of politics in the post-Cold War era. Despite our euphoric insistence upon the virtues of globalisation and seeing everything in a different light, a large number of people all over the world feel that matters of fundamental importance and abiding concern remain unresolved. Prominent among them are disputes over the sanctity of life, the meaning of freedom and the definition of justice. For many of us overwhelmed by the end of the Cold War and the triumph of liberal capitalism, the persistence of any unfulfilled political goals does not seem to be possible. In such circumstances our ignorance and inability to come to terms with this reality influences us to view terrorism wrought by religious groups as mindless violence and irrational in nature. Thus our fear that these groups will resort to WMD terrorism.

Even analysts very much concerned with WMD terrorism and who are at the forefront of making this issue clear to the general public tend to agree that religious terrorism is not entirely without political content. Falkenrath concedes that rarely is religious violence completely apolitical. It is most likely to emerge when a spiritual cause coincides with, and is reinforced by, major political developments that affect whole communities.19 Under such circumstances, will such terrorists really resort to WMD terrorism? It seems more likely that religious terrorists will think twice before embarking upon any act that will make it harder for them to achieve their desired political aim. Also given the need for sustaining public attention in an age when the media seeks drama and new scoops everyday, terrorist incidents need to have a finite quality that produces an instant result. Chemical, biological or even radiological weapons offer no such instantaneous result but tend to act over a prolonged period. This lingering effect coupled with the inability of terrorists to control these weapons once they are used makes them somewhat unfit for terrorist operations.20 The use of mass destruction weapons by terrorists under these circumstances seems very unlikely.

While use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists might not happen in South Asia, the use of such weapons by state actors in retaliation for terrorist acts is a very real possibility in the region. It is to this great threat that we must turn our attention for while terrorism itself might wreak havoc in South Asia, the danger terrorism poses for the Subcontinent is far greater, especially when two nuclear weapons-owning countries —India and Pakistan— are willing to use the issue of terrorism to influence their decision to have a nuclear stand-off between each other.

CAN TERRORISM TRIGGER WMD RETALIATION IN SOUTH ASIA?

From the moment of their violent birth in 1947, secular but largely Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan have had daggers drawn on their Himalayan border. Like his predecessors, General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler, lends succour to Kashmiri Muslims in their nationalist 'freedom fighter' cause against Indian governance on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LOC) that divides Kashmir. Since the province's population is majority Muslim, Pakistan feels justified in demanding that Kashmir be theirs. For largely Hindu India, that is anathema.

Tensions have risen to new heights since 13 December 2001 when terrorists launched a suicide attack on India's Parliament House. No lawmakers were murdered, but the Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, promptly laid the blame for this "stab at the heart of Indian democracy" on two Kashmiri militant groups, Lashkar-e-Taiaba (the Army of the Pure) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (the Army of Muhammad). Both are reputed to have links to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda. The Pakistani President ordered the arrest of the groups' leaders in the wake of the New Delhi attack and a hundred more militants thereafter, and the freezing of their assets. He did this even though Islamabad continues to demand that India produce hard evidence of their complicity, a demand India resists. Pakistan rejects Indian's demand to extradite 20 suspected terrorists. It was in this scenario and United States' War on Terrorism that India went on a war footing.21 Pakistan followed this with its own troop deployment and within days both countries had mobilised heavily along their 1800-mile border (including both the LOC and the undisputed border). The most alarming thing about this latest flare-up was that for the first time both capitals signalled the movement of their missiles during the height of tensions and informed the mass media of this. What is of concern to us is that New Delhi and Islamabad are groping their way through a potential nuclear stand off when tempers are inflamed. This very improvisation might result in a misunderstanding leading to a nuclear exchange. The South Asian nuclear 'balance of terror' does not furnish the kind of stability that was intrinsic to the US-Soviet stand off. We should remember that even at the height of the Cold War, Washington and Moscow collaborated in a strategic doctrine known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Through that construction both countries agreed that they would allow their continent-spanning territories to remain defenceless against each other's long-range ballistic missiles on the assumption that neither would dare to attack the other for fear of committing national suicide. Both their nuclear doctrines rested less on mass destruction than on the psychology of terror they imposed, as set forth in Napoleon's postulate, "In war, everything is mental."

But the case of India and Pakistan is very different. New Delhi and Islamabad do not have nearly as much certainty about each other's nuclear capability as Washington and Moscow In the Cold War days, every nation knew that both USA and the Soviet Union had secured second-strike capability. India and Pakistan do not enjoy the same confidence and predictability about one another's nuclear weapons. Neither can be certain that the opponent's nuclear programme is developing more or less in parallel with its own, at about the same technological pace. That kind of doubt spells a higher level of unpredictability, which in turn compounds the risk that political and military leaders in either country might miscalculate the nuclear prowess, doctrines and the next military moves of their adversary.22 Already there are signs that such miscalculations have taken place. One such example is the divergence between the nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan as manifested in the current stand off. Analysing the Indian mobilisation, Gaurav Kampani, of the Monterey Institute of International Studies says that as a result of the 11 September atrocities and the December assault on the Indian Parliament, New Delhi is attempting to devise a new category of limited conventional conflict that is more aggressive than the low-intensity conflict in Kashmir, but less dangerous and demanding than an all-out onslaught. India has been bogged down for some 10 years now in a low-intensity conflict in Kashmir and is now threatening war on Pakistan if it does not end its support of the Kashmiri insurgency. Through its latest escalatory moves, India is testing whether a limited conflict can be fought short of nuclear exchange. But this search for a window between low-intensity conflict and all-out conventional war is itself potentially destabilising.23 Gregory S. Jones, a specialist in weapons of mass destruction at RAND, is of the same opinion. Under girding the search for a new category of warfare is India's larger strategy of attempting to minimise the number and frequency of its "lost opportunities".24

In the current crisis, India does not want to lose the strategic opportunity afforded by the war on terrorism to deal a knockout blow to the Kashmir insurgency. That the Indians are thinking in this mode and that the present war on terrorism is acting as a catalyst to crystallise those views becomes clear when we see that India's moves are consistent with its own version of limited war introduced following the Kargil intrusion. In this indigenous Indian doctrine "nuclear weapons only deter nuclear weapons, not conventional arms, nuclear powers can safely fight and win limited conventional wars against each other."25 But it takes two to tango or fight a limited war and Pakistan's refusal to accept the Indian definition has put the doctrine of limited war in South Asia under doubt. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf's declaration that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons even if its economic interests were threatened only shows the divergences in India and Pakistan's thoughts on the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Besides this divergence in nuclear doctrine, other dangers lurk for South Asia. Frustrated by its inability to stop Pakistan from continuing its support of the Kashmiri militants and prevented from teaching Pakistan a lesson because of its nuclear shield, Indians are increasingly sounding bellicose. On 11 January, the India Army Chief, General S. Padmanabhan, declared that India had now attained second strike capability and India would punish any state that is "mad enough to use nuclear weapons against any of our assets" and that "it would be punished so severely that its very existence will be in doubt."26 What is more frightening is that Indian political and military leaders, for the first time, are giving definitions of unacceptable damage. Some think that sacrificing 200,000 Indians or a million

Pakistanis is acceptable. Farooq Abdullah even said that it would be worthwhile to risk a nuclear confrontation with Pakistan saying, "We all have to die one day."27

Meanwhile both India and Pakistan are doing their outmost to add more lethal weapons to their already deadly arsenal. For geopolitical reasons, these arsenals are on hair-trigger alert and as things stand, a major incursion by either side in Kashmir or a spreading of combat operations south from Siachen, triggered by terrorist acts of violence could ignite a major war between the nations that could quickly escalate into a nuclear exchange.

Both India and Pakistan say nuclear weapons prevent war from taking place. In other words, deterrence functions and war is prevented from taking place. But, as we have already seen, the presence of nuclear weapons has not stabilised the security position in South Asia. Deterrence too, is far from being a stabilising factor in South Asia. If the psychology of deterrence – guaranteed retaliation—functions as intended, the possession of nuclear weapons is stabilising. But deterrence requires a certain level of nuclear capability and a certain level of sophistication in command and control before the stabilising influence of deterrence kicks in. But no one in South Asia knows with precision as to whether such a situation exists in South Asia. True, India has developed a second strike capability against Pakistan, but the same cannot be said about Pakistan's nuclear strategy.

Command and control of nuclear weapons is another cause of concern for both the countries. Particularly in the case of Pakistan, questions have been raised about the viability of the command and control system. Islamabad's military forces are basically quite cohesive, but there are some disruptive local elements that raise questions about how secure the chain of command and control is. Moreover, the Kashmir problem is a unique situation and has no precise counterpart in the record of the US-Soviet nuclear balance. Both the USA and the Soviet Union shared no common land border and made efforts to prevent any problems between them spiralling out of control. In contrast, the Kashmir dilemma is a perpetually lighted fuse; territorial rather than ideological; and located right on the border of the powers at odds. Estimated flight times from Indian and Pakistani missile launch sites to Islamabad and New Delhi are about 4-5 minutes. The US and the Soviet Union could count on about 30 minutes of nuclear attack warning time. Even that slim margin –five or six times longer than what India and Pakistan might have- was considered an excruciating military and moral vice on the White House and Kremlin. They would have had about half an hour to make what would have been the most fateful decision in human history.28 Under such circumstances deterrence in South Asia is far from being a stabilising factor and might fail disastrously in case of terrorist acts.

To go back to the questions asked at the beginning of this article –will South Asia see acts of WMD terrorism perpetrated by terrorist?– the answer is no. True given the daunting political nightmare and significant ethnic diversity in this part of world, terrorism, insurgency and militancy cannot be stamped out, but it seems very unlikely such terrorism would move into

weapons of mass destruction to gain its objective. While the danger of terrorism should not be underestimated, we should be aware that, given the situation in South Asia, the danger lies in India and Pakistan themselves resorting to weapons of mass destruction in order to stop terrorism. It is this mindset that needs to be zeroed in on and changed while our fight against terrorism in whatever form continues.

- Developments leading to the spread of WMD terrorism are discussed more elaborately in Rashed Uz Zaman 'The Weaponization of Terrorism: Real Dangers or False Alarms?' Theoretical Perspectives, Vols. 7 & 8, 2000-2001, pp. 48-81. See also Jessica Stern, op. cit. (fn. 2); Jonathan B. Tucker, 'Chemical and Biological Terrorism: How Real a Threat', and Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Understanding the New Terrorism', Current History, April 2000.
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- 24 Paul Mann, op. cit. (fn. 22), p. 62.
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- Farooq Abdullah, quoted in Dilara Chowdhury, op. cit. (fn. 21).
- 28 Paul Mann, op. cit. (fn. 22), p.61.