

EXPLICATING THE NEXUS BETWEEN TERRORISM AND NARCO-TERRORISM IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA: A CASE OF INDIA AND MYANMAR

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Abstract

South East Asia's importance for India lies in its geo-strategic location which forces India to expand its strategic relations with these countries. For India's interest, it becomes a key player because of its two major worries viz. China's expanding influence over South East Asia and beyond and the threat of a growing belt of drug trafficking and its sponsoring of military activities and cross-border terrorism. The threat of instability caused by these twin forces-drug trafficking and cross-border terrorism, has impeded the growth of democratic institutions and civil society in the region that has larger implications for a democratic country like India with regard to its larger foreign policy. Furthermore, the clandestine activities and business of drug and opium trade in the South East Asia particularly Myanmar and Thailand have opened the doors of new possibilities for the militant groups. In fact, India's potential to neutralize security threats in this region defines its regional security calculus. Militant groups in the region of both South Asia and South-East Asia get financial and physical support from drug business. Needless to say that India and South East Asian countries face common threats of terrorism, extremism and separatism, drug trafficking and trafficking in general. The commonality of interest provides greater opportunity to cooperate more closely in addressing the regional security issues of narco-terrorism and terrorism as the increasing violence and instability in Myanmar are likely to have serious security implications for the region whose possible solutions can be drawn through organizations like BIMSTEC. Hence, this paper underlines the prime importance of a collective approach with regard to security issues as well as in countering transnational crimes for both India and Myanmar in particular and the South East Asian region in general.

Keywords: Transnational Crime, Terrorism, Narco-Terrorism and BIMSTEC.

Introduction

With the passage of time, the concept of security has shifted from traditional to non-traditional and trans-national security threats with widespread effect on the nation-states. The traditional concept of security arguably gives too much emphasis on military power, hence, it has had a narrowed use in recent times. On the other hand, the non-traditional security threats are defined in a much broader sense covering different areas like religious radicalism, drugs and human trafficking, illegal migration, environmental degradation, climate change, arms race, etc. (Singh K.N. 2013). Non-traditional security issues can be defined as non-military threats that threaten either the unity (political and social integrity) of a nation–state or the health of its inhabitants. They, thus, create insecurity not only for a sovereign state but also for the society as a whole. The problem of non-traditional security threats are not limited to any particular country or region, but has spill-over effect into an ever-widening geographical area with increasing consequences for world security as a whole. It is possible due to the global web created by modern communication, transportation and information technologies, and they all involve transnational and non-state actors (Mathew and Shambaugh 1998). In today’s borderless world, it becomes easy to reach each and every corner of the world. Transnational crimes cover offences committed in more than one state. It also takes place in one state but is planned or controlled in another.

Among these non-traditional and transnational security threats, terrorism and the trade in illicit drugs, arguably, carries the largest societal, political, and economic consequences for the whole world. It threatens the fabric of societies through addiction, crime, and disease. It exacerbates corruption in the already weak states, impairing their economic and political functioning. Moreover, through its linkages to insurgency and terrorism, the drug trade is an increasing threat to regional and international security.

Conceptualizing Terrorism

There is no universal definition of terrorism. Defining terrorism is a complex task due to its nature. The fact is that there are different types of terrorist groups pursuing a variety of goals and using different methods. In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly’s resolution 49/60, stated that terrorism includes “criminal acts intended to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or

particular persons for political purposes” and that such acts “are in any circumstances unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them (UNHC for Human Rights).” In 2004, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 defined terrorist attacks as ‘criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism’ (UNSC Resolution 1566: 2004). It is commonly understood as the acts of violence and terror that target the common people in the pursuit of their political or ideological aims. To fulfil their target, they recruit volatile young people, train them clandestinely, and provide them weapons illegally.

Defining Narco-Terrorism

The term ‘narco-terrorism’ was first coined by President Belaunde Terry of Peru in 1983 to describe a violent collusion of cocaine traffickers and the Maoist group Shining Path to commit joint attacks destabilizing his government forces (Booty, H. 2012). In common language, it means an act or threat of violence by groups involved in the production, transport or sale of illegal drugs, with the aim of destabilizing the governmental ability to suppress these activities. Narco-terrorism is a combination of two terms viz., ‘narco’ and ‘terrorism’, where ‘narcotic’ means illegal drugs business or ‘terrorism’, i.e., where drug mafias become politically active or political actors begin to fund their way through the control of drugs. Drug trade involves several elements viz. Cocaine, Heroin, Marijuana (Ganja), Methamphetamine, Methylene-Dioxy – Methamphetamine, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (UNODC: 2018).

Some of the simplest definitions on narco-terrorism are necessary to mention here for better understanding. Boyce (1987) defines narco-terrorism as ‘the involvement of terrorist organizations and insurgent groups in the trafficking of narcotics’. D. J. Davids (2002) defines narco-terrorism by taking the two terms i.e narco and terrorism together, ‘On the one hand terrorism that aims to protect and support the activities of illegal drug traffickers; and on the other, terrorism

by organizations that use the financial profits of narco-trafficking to support their political, religious or other goals'. The simplest and widest definition of narco-terrorism is given by the Oxford dictionary (1999), 'Terrorism associated with the trade in illicit drugs'.

Nexus between Terrorism and Narco-Terrorism

There is a strong and inalienable connection between terrorism and narco-terrorism. The term narco-terrorism is a combination of two phenomena viz. narcotics trafficking and terrorism. However, the relationship between drug traffickers and terrorists is one of mutual benefit. The relationship between organized crime and terrorism, the nexus most commonly applies to the straightforward use of crime by terrorist groups as a source of funding (Singh K.N. 2013). The formation of alliances between criminal and terrorist organizations is a common tactic (ibid). Drug traffickers benefit from the terrorists' military skills, weapons supply, and access to clandestine organizations. Terrorists gain a source of revenue and expertise in illicit transfer and laundering of proceeds from illicit transactions. Both groups bring corrupt officials whose services provide mutual benefits, such as greater access to fraudulent documents, including passports and customs papers (Beers, R. 2002).

Terrorist groups and drug trafficking organizations increasingly rely on what is known as cell structures to accomplish their respective goals. However, there may certainly be a strong central leadership but day-to-day operations are basically carried out by members of compartmentalized cells (Beers, R. 2002). This structure enhances security by providing a degree of separation between the leadership and the rank-and-file. They use informal transfer systems such as "hawala," and also rely on bulk cash smuggling, multiple accounts, and front organizations to launder money (ibid). Both groups make use of fraud documents, including passports and other identification and documents to smuggle goods and weapons. They both fully exploit their networks to conduct business. In addition, they use multiple cell phones and are careful about what they say on the phone to increase communications security (Beers, R. 2002).

The Case of India and Myanmar

Needless to say, both terrorism and drug trafficking are mainly responsible

for bringing instability and uncertainty in South East Asia. As an immediate neighbour of South East Asia, India has been suffering from these twin evils. India is the connecting bridge between South Asia and South-East Asia. India's relation with South East Asia lies on two important factors. Firstly, India's strategic location which is the main and only transit route for South Asia to reach South East Asia or vice versa. Secondly, from a security perspective, India is sandwiched in between the Golden Triangle (area where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet) and Golden Crescent (areas covering Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan). India becomes a transit hub for transnational activities particularly for drug trafficking (Das, Pushpita: 2012).

Myanmar, which shares a border with India, is rich in natural and mineral resources. This sometimes affects the country negatively. As per the UNODC, World Drug Report, 20005, Myanmar is the second largest producer of illicit opium after Afghanistan. The Shan State, the Kokang, Wa, and Mong-La regions are the major areas of opium cultivation. From there, opium is transported to neighbouring countries, particularly China and India. Another major concern in Myanmar is the production of Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS), primarily of methamphetamine. Though Myanmar has a limited chemical industry and does not domestically produce the precursor chemicals required for the production of ATS, it depends on China and India for chemicals. Drug trafficking gives ample opportunities to other related crimes such as money laundering and corruption, human trafficking both internal and external are major concerns for Myanmar (UNODC: 2005). The ongoing political, ethnic and economic instability in Myanmar further aggravates the volatile situation.

In fact, in the case of South-East Asia, the main source of funding for militant and insurgent groups comes from 'illicit money'. That is, it becomes a safe haven for insurgent groups who completely depend on drug business for their survival. Money coming from drug trafficking is used by such groups. Thus it is necessary to break the nexus.

It needs to be underlined that in recent years it is the ethnic minorities in Myanmar who have become the easy victims of the menace drug trafficking, which in turn provides fertile ground for them in militant activities, for example, the Qaida branches in the islands surrounding Myanmar have allegedly been training the Rohingyas to resort into

“Jihad”. Apparently, the Quida terrorist groups of Myanmar publicly called for the support of the Rohingyas Muslims from jihadists based in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and the Philippines (South East Asia: 2017). Needless to say, the Ethnic Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar are easy victims of trafficking of all kinds. Added to this, they are also rendered stateless now as the Myanmar government is not granting them citizenship status. This helplessness has made it easy for the militant groups’ active in different parts of the world to enlist the hapless Rohingya Muslims into narco-terrorist activities. To put it in other words, through these helpless migrants, the traffickers have been smuggling drugs to neighbouring countries illegally. In most of the cases, the migrants take the help of the smugglers, while in others, the smugglers recruit the migrants. Due to difficult paperwork, they largely depend on smugglers, who engage them in drug trafficking.

The nexus between terrorism and narco-terrorism is mainly responsible for instability in Myanmar and its neighbouring countries. India and Myanmar are victims of both terrorism and narco-terrorism. India is a habitual consumer of opium and other varieties of drugs like bhang, marijuana/ganja and hashish. India gets it from Myanmar which is the main supplier of drugs to India due to its geographical proximity. Political instability and lawlessness in Myanmar also aggravate the situation by giving ample scope to traffickers and criminals. The growing demand for drugs among the young local population in the Northeastern states of India (Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland), political instability and insecurity created by insurgencies in the border areas of the region of South and South-East Asia as well as poorly guarded border provided a fertile environment for traffickers to smuggle heroin and other drug substances into India through the India-Myanmar border. From the North-Eastern part of India, drugs have been supplied to the other parts of India particularly Bihar, Bombay and Delhi. The Shan state of Myanmar is the largest producer of illegal drugs and from there it enters into the North-Eastern state of India. Opium produced along the Indo-Myanmar border especially in Manipur and Mizoram is reportedly transported to Myanmar for the manufacture of heroin (Das, Pushpita: 2012). In addition, drugs are being trafficked from Myanmar into Tibet via India and Thailand, and from there into other provinces. The greater availability of cheap and high-purity heroin, along with limited access to drug treatment, combined with ineffective

counternarcotics policies, have resulted in greater rates of addiction along with other public health problems (ibid).

Drug trafficking facilitates other organized criminal activities such as human trafficking, sex trafficking, and weapon running, all of which use the same networks and routes to smuggle people, arms and contraband. Precursor chemicals such as ephedrine, pseudoephedrine and acetic anhydride from India are trafficked into Myanmar to cater to the demands of numerous mobile laboratories manufacturing heroin and amphetamine type stimulants (ATS). Seizures of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine indicate an increasing trend of trafficking of these chemicals from India to Myanmar. The most important route is the one which starts from Mandalay, continues to Monya and Kalewa and then bifurcates to enter India at two points. The first moves northwards, enters Moreh in Manipur through Tamu and travels thence to Imphal and Kohima via National Highway-39. The second branch moves southwards and enters Champai in Mizoram through Rihkhwadar (ibid).

However, drug trafficking in the region was slow during the initial phase of COVID-19 due to the restriction of movement of people. However, the traffickers quickly changed their style of distribution. They adopted contactless methods like online delivery and service. In fact, they took advantage of the COVID-19 crisis where millions lost their jobs and income. As a result of which, particularly, young and children became addicted to phones and became victims of this online drug business (UNODC: 2021).

Role of BIMSTEC

These non-traditional security threats can be better addressed through different international and inter-regional organizations. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is one such inter-regional organization which has been playing a crucial role, which cannot be ignored. BIMSTEC is a unique regional organization which basically connects South Asia with South East Asia. It also brings SAARC and ASEAN nations under one platform. The BIMSTEC was established in 1997 with the purpose of peaceful and progressive development in the region of both South Asia and South-East Asia. It consists of five South Asian countries viz. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, with two South East Asian countries of Myanmar and Thailand (BIMSTEC: Online

Access). Both Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) as one of the priority sectors of BIMSTEC was added in the Eighth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 18-19 December 2005. The Joint Working Group on CTTC is the major sector of BIMSTEC which addresses the problems of terrorism and transnational crimes. There are six sub-groups which work on specific aspects of CTTC cooperation (Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Online Access).

- 1) Sub-Group on Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals.
- 2) Sub-Group on Intelligence Sharing.
- 3) Sub-Group on Legal and Law Enforcement Issues.
- 4) Sub-Group on Anti- Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism.
- 5) Sub-Group on Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration.
- 6) Sub-Group on the Cooperation on Countering Radicalization and Terrorism.

Many productive summits have been conducted through BIMSTEC to address the problem of terrorism and drug trafficking since its formation. In the Kathmandu declaration held 30-31 August 2018, member countries strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations wherever and by whomsoever committed that there can be no justification whatsoever for any act of terrorism. The summit also addressed that the fight against terrorism should target not only terrorists, terror organizations and networks but also identifies and hold accountable States and non-State entities that encourage, finance terrorism, provide sanctuaries to terrorists and terror groups and falsely extol their virtues (Fourth BIMSTEC Summit: 2018). The BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking was come into force on 16 March 2021 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

The 9th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG-CTTC) was hosted by Bhutan virtually on 25th November 2021 due to COVID. The meeting focussed on the emerging traditional and non-traditional security threats within

the BIMSTEC region. In this meeting, India played a prominent role by highlighting the threats emanating from cross-border terrorism from terrorist groups such as LeT, JeM, HM etc. and transnational organized crime such as drug trafficking, illegal weapons smuggling etc. (ibid). The meeting made valuable suggestions and recommendations on wide ranging issues to enhance collective cooperation and collaboration in countering terrorism and transnational crimes in the region.

Despite the effort to address the above issues, BIMSTEC needs to work and improve its strategies more religiously. There are certain grey areas where BIMSTEC has failed to address. The first and foremost is that the member countries need to take the organization seriously. Because the BIMSTEC summit has taken place only five times since its birth in 1997 the first held in Bangkok 2004, the second and third summits were held in New Delhi in 2008 and Nay Pyi Taw in 2014. The fourth was held in 2018 in Kathmandu. The last one was held in Sri Lanka in March of 2022 (BIMSTEC: 2022). It has failed to address the problems of Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar. This problem has created a chaotic condition not only in Myanmar, but also in both South and South East Asia. The constant conflict among the member countries does not augur well for tackling the menaces of drug trafficking and terrorism.

Conclusion

The problem of transnational crime, particularly narco-terrorism in Southeast Asia is severe. India has been directly affected due to its geographical proximity. Illegal migration, specifically Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar to Bangladesh and India, refugee issues, porous border, mistreatment and mismanagement by state authorities provides fuel to the conflict. It is beyond the control of an individual country to take any action. Hence, active cooperation and collective efforts are required to address it. It can be said in this context that a coordination of anti-drug and anti-terror policy can be used, and is necessary, to effectively deal with both threats. There is a triangular relationship here among drug production, drug trafficking and terrorism. Therefore, to reduce the militant activities, the government needs to check the drug trafficking, and again to tackle the drug trafficking, there is a need to destroy the drug production particularly cultivation of poppy and production of opium itself which is the root of the whole problem. Thus both drug traffickers and militants should be treated as criminals.

The governments of both India and Myanmar should adopt an inclusive approach. State, non-state actors, civil society, local leaders or representatives, international and regional organizations need to work together in order to get rid of the menace. International cooperation is also required in the countries of origin, transit and destination of drug trade. Awareness should be created among the local people about the hazardous effects of drug uses and its nexus with terrorism.

Thus, the root cause of drug trafficking and sustenance of terrorism in Myanmar is drug cultivation. Therefore, what is necessary is the destruction of the poppy crop to prevent the Cocaine or heroin from entering into the market. Nevertheless, while destroying the crop, it should always be kept in mind about the alternative livelihood of the farmers who are dependent on drug cultivation. It also needs to study the extent to which the illicit economy provides employment for the local population. Without taking care of the whole scenario, any kind of harsh steps would backfire or may have dangerous consequences. It simply means that more and more people may join in insurgent activities. Lastly, in order to tackle the twin evils of terrorism and narco-terrorism, we need to innovate and adopt new strategies. International cooperation is urgently required. The border areas which provide fertile ground for such illegal and criminal activities need to be guarded seriously. Here the international and national government should take the help of local people who are well aware of the whole situation.

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