

The Geo-politics of Jihad: Militant movements in South-Central Asia and Regional Security

Simbal Khan

All through its long and varied history, Afghanistan due to its unique geo political attributes has had a profound impact on developments within the countries of South and Central Asian region. When the Red army crossed the Oxus River in 1979, the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan set into motion a new cycle of war which sucked into its vortex a number of interlinked forces; local Afghan, regional and international. The geopolitical fissures that crisscross the conflicted borders of this region when mixed with the Alchemy of Jihad created a unique structural dynamic, which to this day is churning out a an endless stream of militant groups of a dazzling variety. The 2001 US intervention only re-activated the productive capacity of these political/structural forces.

The paper argues that the two defining elements that have forged the lethal Alchemy of militant groups in the region are **Geo-politics and Jihad**. These two elements have often worked in paradoxical ways. The elements of geo-politics are clearly reflected within the group-identity structures of the militant movements, which are organised along regional, ethnic, sub-ethnic and trans-border communal lines. Whereas the basics of Jihad have provided the ideational glue to bind these often disparate forces and have often enabled them to cooperate across these very geo-political lines which separate them.

The deep geo-political cleavages which have been the drivers of conflict in South-Central Asia are still profoundly shaping the dynamics of militant organisations. They are shaping not only the operational abilities of these militant groups, their networks, what and who they choose to fight, but are also likely to moderate the responses of the countries in the region to how they respond to the threat posed by these organisations.

Militant Organisations in South central Asia: threat to Regional security

Militant organisations in South and Central Asian region pose a critical threat to the national security of the regional states and have increasingly added another dimension of instability at the regional level. The threat posed by trans-national terrorist organisations to regional and global security cannot be overstated.

Terrorist attacks within the countries of the region have not only created varying levels of insecurity, in the case of Pakistan, they have severely impacted economic growth. This in turn has created severe societal vulnerabilities impacting human security and producing a governance crisis. At the regional level, the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks brought two nuclear armed states, India and Pakistan, to the brink of war. Even now the presence of what is being called the 'Sub-conventional threat' makes the nuclear security regime in South Asia extremely volatile and vulnerable.

However despite these glaring common dangers and security threats, the region remains far from developing Regional approaches to deal with the threat of 'Jihadist Militant movements.'

There are many reasons for this but one element which underpins the complexity of the issue is that most militant organisations in one way or another have cleaved to the long enduring Geo-political fault lines in the region. Moreover these geo-political objectives also continue to inform the political agendas of the regional countries; it also shapes their responses to the activities and actions of militant organisations.

Another related factor is that although a unifying element of Jihadist ideology runs through all of these militant groups, they remain vastly differentiated. Just after 9/11 there was a tendency to collapse all conceptual distinctions which define the alphabet soup of these militant organisations. But after 10 years we have seen that there is a moving away from the system level securitization of 'war on Terror' which has failed to level the various geo-political and operational differences which characterise these organisations which operate in the South-Central Asian region.

Geo-politics and Jihad

The two elements have often worked in paradoxical ways to shape the organisational structures and objectives of militant organisations in the region. The elements of geo-politics are clearly reflected within the group-identity structures of the militant movements and insurgents. These groups are largely organised along regional, ethnic, tribal, and sub-ethnic clan structures. At the same time, they act upon and are in turn, impacted by the politics of trans-border communities. This trans-border element in turn links up to larger security agendas of regional states which host these communities. These group identities and fissures are often drivers of conflict and Civil war. Good cases in point are the 1990's Afghanistan and intra militant struggles in FATA in 2004-5. At another level, however, the basics of Jihad have provided the ideational glue to bind these often disparate forces and have often enabled them to cooperate across the very geo-political/ethnic/sectarian lines which separate them. E.g. Deobandi Taliban, which are predominantly Pushtun have cooperated with the whole spectrum of other ethnic based groups. For example, the Uzbek/Tajik IMU found sanctuary and have cooperated with the Taliban who have used them to extend Taliban control to northern Afghanistan. Also the Punjabi dominated LeT which is Ahle Hadith, has been able to operate in Eastern Afghanistan alongside Salafist Pushtun Taliban groups with whom they have shared the same territorial/operational space.

The geo-politics of Borders: South Central Asian Region.

The geo-political fault lines that have characterised the border spaces in the South-Central Asian region have played a complex role as drivers of conflict. It is also the geo-politics of the border spaces which delineates the physical terrain along which much of the operational action of these movements takes place. Another important element to note is that within this physical terrain the militant organisations demonstrate a remarkable ability to operate on the various geo-political fronts at the same time. Also they have shown the capacity to shift their focus from one geo-political hotspot to another following closely the regional flash points.

Mapping the physical terrain along three acknowledged geo-political flashpoints, which serve as a seamless space for operations for most of the Militant movements in South-Central Asia, reveal certain valuable insights:

1. **Borders in the Fergana Valley and the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan-** the Ferghana Valley region is shared between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The territorial borders between these three countries remain ill defined; have a number of Enclaves and trans-border populations spill over across national borders. All three states can be defined as varyingly repressive post soviet authoritarian states. Mid 1990's saw a very bloody Tajik civil war which dragged in trans-border Uzbek communities which spill over into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The IMU or the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan originated from Namangan and Andijan. Fleeing repressive force of the Karimov government in the mid 1990's IMU fighters moved into neighbouring Tajikistan, joining the civil war on the side of the Islamic Renaissance Party and found refuge in the Tavildara valley. There they assimilated other fighters from IRP (Islamic Renaissance party of Tajikistan) some Uighur militants from China and Chechens etc. In 1999 they launched armed incursions into Uzbekistan from the Batken enclave in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley. The UN negotiated end to Tajik civil war in 1997 forced the IMU and associated Central Asian militant fighters to set up a base in Afghanistan where they joined the Taliban. When the US military intervened in Afghanistan launching military strikes against the Taliban in Oct. 2001, the IMU fought on the Northern front in Kunduz under the Al Qaeda led 555 Brigade which was commanded by Juma Namangani, the famous IMU commander from Uzbekistan. After the fall of the Taliban in Nov. 2001, the majority of IMU fighters were forced to find refuge with the Masood tribe in SWA (South Waziristan Agency) in Pakistani FATA (Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies). In 2002 some IMU members splintered into IJU (Islamic Jihad Union), a wing which has since acted as al Qaeda's recruitment and outreach wing to Europeans of Turkish decent. A number of reports in 2010 suggest that a large number of the IMU cadre have re injected and established links with Afghan Tajik and Uzbek drug cartels in Northern Afghanistan and are acting as a bridge-head for the Taliban and helping them expand influence in the Northern Afghan Provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan.
2. **Mapping the militant terrain on the Pak-Afghan border:** the km 2500 Pak-Afghan border or the Durand line remains ill defined, under-regulated and at places almost non- existent and is exclusively inhabited by trans-border Pushtun

tribal groups. There has been a tremendous spill over impact of Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and war in the 1980s as 4 million refugees crossed over this border zone into Pakistan. On the Pakistani side Afghan Refugee camps are still around after 30 year cycle of war. There are still close to 1.7-2million registered refugees and close to a million unregistered Afghans in Pakistan. This enduring Refugee population and the politics of the camps (e.g. Shamshatoo Camp outside the city of Peshawar is run by Hizb-e-Islami led by Gulbadin Hikmatyar since past 30 years and still a recruiting ground for the Hizb) has shaped the politics of the border zone in complex and critical ways. These camps and refugee populations have played a profound role in the recruitment strategies of militant organisations and the ability of groups like the Taliban to regenerate their cadre while suffering high attrition rates due to stepped up NATO/US military campaign in 2010-2011. While the Afghan Taliban operate in Afghanistan, for the past 30 years they have become embedded within the social-political and economic landscape of Pakistan's border zones; Baluchistan province, parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK, formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province), and key cities in the Pakistani heartland (e.g. Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta). The Afghan Taliban emerged from Deobandi madaris (p. madrassah) in Pakistan and has retained their nearly exclusive ethnic Pushtun and Deobandi sectarian orientation.

After 2001 war in Afghanistan some Kashmir centric groups such as LeT (Lashkar-e-Tayyabha), HUJI (Harkat-I-Jihad-Islami) etc. have re focused activities on the Pak-Afghan front. The ongoing phase of war has seen the rise of another lethal organization: TTP. The rise of the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) is a testimony to the complex and dangerous balancing act Pakistan has played. Pakistan has strived to secure its relevance to the US led coalition's campaign in Afghanistan for the last 10 years while at the same time has tried to secure its own geo-political objectives. The TTP is an umbrella organization which includes certain militant groups which endorse Al Qaeda's Takfiri ideology and consider the Pakistani state, its citizens and cities, legitimate targets as a punishment for their cooperation with the invading Coalition armies in Afghanistan.

3. **The LoC: Pak-India disputed Kashmir border.** This disputed border, high in the Himalayas, for the past 60 years has defined interstate relations between the two South Asian neighbours, India and Pakistan. Trans- border communities divided by the LoC (line of Control), presence of Kashmiri militant groups within Pakistan

held Azad Kashmir, question of state support to these militant groups etc. have been a cause of interstate tensions and war. There are several Kashmiri militant groups which proclaim to focus upon the struggle for Kashmiri independence. These include the Jamaat-e-Islami based HM or Hiz-ul-Mujahideen and Al Badr which tend to be comprised of ethnic Kashmiris and have retained their focus on Kashmir. In addition there are a number of Deobandi groups (JM, HUJI, LeJ, etc.); and the Ahl-e-Hadith group LeT which in the last 10 years, as the latest phase of US led war started in Afghanistan, have moved away from an exclusive focus on Kashmir. Many of them have turned a full circle and since at least the 2005, have increased their focus on the Pak-Afghan border. While LeT has increased its operations in North Eastern Afghanistan against NATO troops, splinter groups from Jaish, Huji and LeJ have aligned with Al Qaeda and the increasingly lethal TTP to open dual fronts-against NATO troops in Afghanistan and against the Pakistani State and military.

Prospects for Regional Cooperation

The enduring national/territorial conflicts over ill defined borders and enclaves in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia; on the Durand line between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the festering dispute on Kashmir between India and Pakistan, have prevented the development of regional approaches to address the problem of militant organisations. The fact that some of these organisations remain invested in the geo-political dynamics of these complex border spaces, there is less likelihood that the problem will lend itself to be addressed on region level frameworks. The fine line that divides insurgent groups such as the Afghan Taliban that use terrorist tactics for political ends and terrorist organisations with global agendas, make it difficult to develop regional approaches to deal with the security threats.

The current trends suggest that that the countries of South-Central Asia are likely to continue to apply their own self-referenced criteria of differentiation to the security threat posed by theses organisations. As the international community moves away from the narrative of system level war on terror to strategies which focus on local contexts, the politics of militant groups and terrorism is likely to become a focus of national policies in the South-Central Asian region. Regional countries and International actors are attempting to draw lines and differentiate

Afghan Taliban from Al Qaeda. Pakistan continues to respond differently to Afghan Taliban and the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) and Kashmiri militant groups focused on Kashmiri independence from Indian control. At the same time, Pakistan security forces have stepped up military actions against those Kashmiri groups (Ilyas Kashmiri group and other smaller splinters of LeJ e.g. LeJ-Alami) who aligned with Al Qaeda to carry out attacks against Pakistani state and its security forces.

Despite this complex level of differentiation, sustained regional processes that involve developing broad region-wise mechanisms that focus on cooperation in the field of law enforcement, policing and judicial reform can function as CBMs. These CBMs if sustained over time are likely to create greater space for bilateral cooperation between regional states to deal with the threat posed to regional security by such trans-border militant organisations. Such processes, at bilateral and regional level, can contribute to creating an enabling environment at the domestic level. Such an environment could prove instrumental in facilitating national governments to develop appropriate political and security strategies; tools and narratives to deal with the in-house challenges posed by the problem of militancy and by doing so, mitigate the threat to regional security.