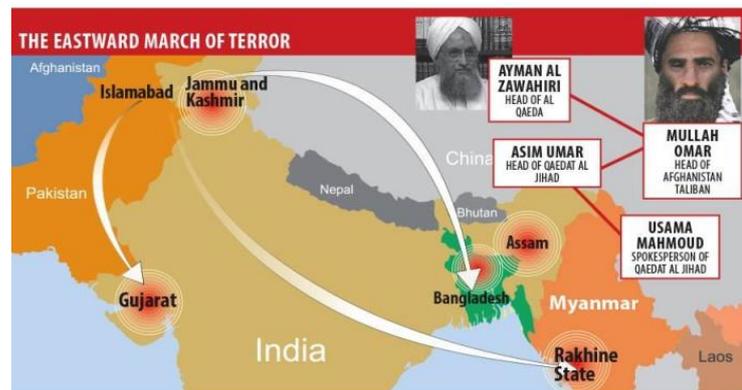


## Global Extremism & South Asia

Covering an area of almost two million square miles and home to over a quarter of the world's population, current regional and global developments between the West and South Asia necessitate greater security cooperation in order to guarantee mutual strategic interests and address global security challenges.

### Expansion of ISIL in the region

ISIL developed large 'market penetration' in South Asia by overcoming language barriers, exploiting sympathies amongst authorities and locals, as well as, building underground cells that have allowed ISIL to successfully recruit more jihadists to join the battlefields in Syria and Iraq.



The recruitment and rise of South Asians in the ISIL hierarchy has specifically enabled the group to carry out extremely successful linguistic market penetration. Recruitment videos and propaganda materials are released in the Indian-subcontinent in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Tamil besides other regional languages and dialects.

ISIL has also been gaining considerable ground in Afghanistan due to an extremist conversion from Taliban to ISIL which has inspired members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to alter their allegiance as well. While, monetary benefits are stated as the main reason for the conversion, through rapid expansion, the announcement of a Caliphate and their anti-Shia ideology, it is proven the romanticism of ISIL is the main influence.

If radicals of other Pakistani groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the anti-Shia group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, flip sides as well there could be a snowball effect. The conversion can be interpreted as thinking that their own organizations have compromised too much on their radical ideology with the Pakistani military in order to maintain their protection.

Additionally, Bangladesh witnessed the rise of Pro-ISIL outfits who carry out a sophisticated online and on the ground recruitment policy. A newly created front called Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK) is the main and most vocal platform for recruits and fundraisings from Bangladesh. It aims to establish a new 'caliphate' encompassing Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

### **Jihadist competition in the region**

The remarkable expansion of ISIL has not only sent shockwaves throughout the Western world, but has also instigated other extremist forces like Al-Qaeda to strengthen their reach and adopt new strategies in South Asia.

Worried by ISIL's international ambitions, Al-Qaeda decided to bring at least a dozen independently operating extremists groups (mostly from Pakistan and Afghanistan) together into one branch. These groups have longstanding, extremely extensive networks in the region supplemented by the formidable infrastructure of thousands of Madrassas. These Madrassas mostly promote religious education based on the doctrine of extremism, which serves as ideological foundation to these groups.

This new branch in South Asia, called Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) has proposed several locations for potential operations including: Kashmir, Gujarat, Assam, Burma and Bangladesh are part of this ambitious and dangerous coalition.

Whether the establishment of the branch is an announcement to counter ISIL's expansion or an invitation to work together with them is debatable. But by all means, both scenarios are extremely dangerous.

### **NATO's global partners**

Since 9/11, NATO has focused more on addressing global threats stemming from areas beyond the North Atlantic. Thus, NATO's global partnership program was created in 2011, which to date, includes Pakistan and Afghanistan.

There is an urgent need to work more closely and diligently to eliminate the global security concerns emanating from South Asia. Bilateral conflicts of interest between Pakistan and Afghanistan should urge NATO to formulate well-defined mutual goals much like the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). The self-differentiation and diversity components of ICI have been good improvements as compared to previous agreements. The objectives as stated in the current Tailored Cooperation Programmes are too vague and thereby vulnerable.

The government of Afghanistan needs to be strengthened financially and militarily in order to tackle the various extremist forces in the country. Economic development and mainstream education should become the tenets of progress and de-radicalization. The current NATO Mission 'Resolute Support' focuses on training and advising Afghan forces which creates a strong foundation, however it should remain flexible by giving due attention to the ANA Trust. A recent increase in violence, casualties and the overall expansion of Taliban and ISIL warrant for an extended mission. Therefore, the Afghan Army has not been successful in countering the resurgence of Taliban forces in the south and east of Afghanistan. In the interest of peace in Afghanistan and maintaining the strategic gains made by NATO forces, the current changed scenario would justify a longer mandate for the Resolute Support Mission.

The Pakistani civil government and its military establishment need to coordinate regarding the country's stand vis-à-vis terrorism. The Pakistani Army is the seventh largest army in the

world and should be ensuring the objectives of NATO's partnership which is crucial to provide an effective international security structure. NATO must ensure that the political and security perspectives of the military establishment in the country are comparable, compatible and have equal commitment and dedication from all involved parties.

### **NATO's role for potential cooperation**

Economic interdependency amongst countries in South Asia is key to regional stabilization. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established to pursue this objective with integration in South Asia, but needs to be strengthened through diplomatic facilitation from NATO Allies and Partners.

Opportunities to formalize intelligence sharing policies among the region ought to be availed. The spread of extremist forces in addition to their interrelated networks and infrastructure should compel the nations in South Asia to overcome mistrust. Instead, they should embark upon a path of institutionalized cooperation regarding timely and accurate intelligence sharing.

Besides providing expertise and experience to these countries on this matter, NATO should avail opportunities of engaging in bilateral agreements of intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism policies and maritime security with the respective countries in South Asia. The Wales Summit Declaration emphasizes that there is a need for a coordinated international approach to counter ISIL. Considering the true spirit of this Declaration, the recruitment wave of ISIL in South Asia should act as a trigger to widen the formal coalition against ISIL and enhance it by bringing South Asian countries on board.

Sharing best practices from NATO's Training Mission-Iraq (NTM-I) into its recent Capacity Building Initiatives (CBI) in Jordan, Moldova and Georgia have had an enormous beneficial impact in these countries. They have succeeded in strengthening their respective national security apparatus against external threats as the main focused areas of training, mentoring, equipment donation and coordination from the NTM-I were continued and incorporated into these CBI's. NATO's contribution to international stability, security and conflict prevention could also prove to be a robust base for cooperation in South Asia. As there is an urgent need to expand NATO's advising and assisting expertise in security and defence reforms while aiming to encourage the establishment of self-sufficient security institutions in these countries.

The training and education components of these initiatives include providing for the infrastructure and transforming these engagements into long term bilateral security cooperation that could prove to be extraordinary fruitful in countries like Afghanistan, which struggles with high illiteracy rates among their armed forces and security establishment; and Bangladesh, which struggles with a highly politicized military.

## **Collective approach**

From the expansion of ISIL and its worldwide recruitment policies, it has become evident that the threat of terrorism is not restricted to its region of origin anymore. The mass use of Internet and social media has obscured the borders of extremism in South Asia as well and pose an undeniable menace to global peace. South Asian allies and partners should be formally incorporated and take a lead in implementing policies that compliment NATO objectives and stem the tide of radicalization in the region as this situation demands a collective approach from the West and the East as equal partners and stakeholders.



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