

The Locus of Error

Has the Gravity of Terrorism ‘Shifted’ in Asia?[?]

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Terrorism in its modern form has been with us for decades, at least since the late 1960s, and has continuously expanded its sphere of influence and operation. Yet it never fails to take its victim societies by surprise when it is applied in a new theatre, however gradual or deliberate its march. This is why it has been possible to speak of the greatest single terrorist outrage in human history – the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US – as ‘terror in very slow motion,’ a catastrophe that, at least in its broad contours, should have been anticipated, and that lay squarely “along an uninterrupted continuum that extended several years into the past.”¹ Victim societies have, without exception, been

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¹ Ajai Sahni, “South Asia: Extremist Islamist Terror & Subversion,” in K P S Gill and Ajai Sahni, eds., *The Global Threat of Terror: Ideological, Material*

shocked into an utter confusion of responses in the wake of each such expansion, and there is little evidence that the experience of other nations or communities has ever been absorbed into the policies and strategic perspectives of those nations who have not themselves experienced terrorism.

The problem is not just one between nations, but within nations as well. To take the Indian case, we discover that, despite decades of experience with terrorist movements, each new manifestation takes State governments and police forces by surprise. After over 10 years of terrorism in Punjab, for instance, the wave of terrorist actions commencing in the end-1980s in Jammu and Kashmir were greeted with panic and confusion that was reminiscent of the reaction to the emergence of terror in Punjab in the end-1970s. Similarly, the first major act of terrorism in Gujarat – at the Akshardham Temple² – once again demonstrated high levels of uncertainty and disorder in the state's responses. The general bewilderment extends into the popular discourse on terrorism, and few who are located outside the areas worst afflicted by the scourge demonstrate any sensitivity toward, or understanding of, the issues and the enormity of the challenge involved. Despite a multiplicity of enduring terrorist movements in different parts of the country, moreover, India is still to define a coherent policy of response or official doctrine on terrorism, and many of the state's initiatives in this context tend to be contradictory and counter-productive.

When the attack on a nightclub frequented by Western tourists occurred at Bali, the same patterns of shock and

and Political Linkages, New Delhi: Bulwark Books – ICM, 2002, pp. 181-83.

² "...on September 24, 2002, two terrorists launched an attack in the Akshardham Temple of the Swaminarayan sect of Hindus, one of the most hallowed temples in the western Indian State of Gujarat. They first lobbed grenades and opened indiscriminate fire on the devotees in the crowded hour of the evening *aarti* (prayer), and then, as darkness fell, entered into a protracted exchange of fire with security forces that lasted through the night. They were eventually killed at dawn by a crack team of the National Security Guard, but only after they had taken the lives of 32 persons, including 16 women and four children, and injured at least another 74. With this outrage, militant Islamists opened up one more theatre of terrorism on Indian soil." K.P.S. Gill, "Gujarat: New Theatre of Islamist Terror", *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR) Volume 1 No. 11, September 30, 2002, http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/1_11.htm#assessment1.

disorientation were in evidence in Indonesia's – and indeed in all of South East Asia's – reactions. The bombing in Bali “shocked the world, not only because it is considered a follow-up to a series of terrorist acts which included Sept. 11, 2001 in the U.S., but also because it occurred on Indonesia's tourist island, *one of our few remaining safe havens*.”³ This theme of a ‘paradise lost’ was often repeated in the media coverage of the blasts,⁴ but the truth is, “nowhere was safe in Indonesia,”⁵ and there was ample evidence that the country had “become a hotbed for Islamic militants.”⁶ Yet, the leadership responses displayed an unwillingness to accept the magnitude of the challenge and the pervasiveness of the threat. The US had been “warning for weeks of a ‘specific and credible’ attack being mounted...”⁷ But the Indonesian leaders continued to act “like parents trying to hide the fact that their children are chronic drug addicts despite what their friends and neighbours know.”⁸ Indonesia had long been plagued by Islamist extremism and terrorism in wide areas of its sprawling territory, and though Bali had remained ‘safe’ before the October 12 attack, a look at the incidence of terrorist activities and concentration of militant groups on the map would have demonstrated the enveloping pattern of the violence. Any objective assessment on the basis of such an analysis would have acknowledged the inevitability of an eventual attack on the ‘soft target’ that Bali was, even in the absence of any specific

³ Imanuddin, “Intelligence capability and the Bali blasts,” *The Jakarta Post*, October 29, 2002, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20021029E02>. [Emphasis added].

⁴ “Paradise Lost,” Channel NewsAsia, October 16, 2002.

⁵ “Britain Embassy warns ‘nowhere safe’ in Indonesia,” *Jakarta Post*, October 26, 2002, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20021026B01>.

⁶ “Lessons from the Bali blast”, *Jakarta Post*, October 16, 2002, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20021016E03>.

⁷ Ewen MacAskill and John Aglionby “Suspicion Turns on Indonesia's Islamist Militants,” *The Guardian*, London, October 14, 2002, www.guardian.co.uk/indonesia/Story/0,2763,811368,00.html

⁸ Kornelius Purba, “Stop pretending that we are safe,” *Jakarta Post*, October 18, 2002, www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20021018E03

intelligence. But, as *Jakarta Post* asserted, “Indonesia was in denial.”⁹

These patterns of conflict and disorientation in the face of terror are virtually the norm and extend well into the strategic community. The sheer enormity of the transformations that terrorism has wrought in the nature of warfare is yet to penetrate the discourse on the subject, and is only rarely reflected in the works of scholars and specialists on the subject – and is rarer still in the public pronouncements of policy makers. In one of the few examples of such understanding, Dave McIntyre, writing in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist outrage in the US, comments:

... it is fair to ask, before we proceed, “what happened to the concept of the RMA?” The surprising answer is that an RMA has occurred – but we did not recognize it, because we got the definition wrong. After a decade of study and coaxing by military scholars (and apathy or hostility by non-military scholars), a Revolution in Military Affairs has arrived. Except we did not do it to “them” – “they” did it to us.¹⁰

In the early months after 9/11, there was a brief crystallisation of the international will against terrorism that created the transient illusion of a wider and deeper understanding of the mounting danger. The contours of a coherent and uniform international policy against terrorism were outlined in a succession of UN Resolutions,¹¹ which rejected the prevailing moral ambivalence on terrorism and declared unambiguously that no moral and political justification could be accepted for acts of terror. These were reinforced by strong and sustained rhetoric from the international leadership, as President George W. Bush spoke of “a world where freedom itself is under attack” and

⁹ “National tragedy”, *Jakarta Post*, October 14, 2002, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20021014E01>.

¹⁰ Dave McIntyre, “We need to Study War Some More,” *Journal of International Security Affairs*, Washington, D.C., Summer 2002, pp. 11-12 and 3.

¹¹ Most prominently, Resolutions 1368 and 1373.

promised, “Our war on terror... will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”¹²

A little over a year after the catastrophic attacks of September 11, ambivalence and vacillation are, once again, the dominant feature of our responses against terrorism, and there is increasing evidence and mounting apprehension of a loss of direction. As Fareed Zakaria notes in the context of America’s abrupt shift of emphasis, from the slow and frustrating war against terrorism to the apparently more winnable – and hence potentially more satisfying – engagement with Iraq, “A year ago people around the world were holding candle light vigils for the United States. Today the easiest way to get people cheering on the streets is to denounce US policies.”¹³ And again, echoing rising concerns across the world, Harvey Feldman notes:

When we read that warlords are carving off parts of the Afghanistan that we helped liberate, and that there is no counter-action; that Pakistan has become the new base and sanctuary for al Qaeda and other terrorist organisations; that although Iran remains the world’s principal backer of terrorism, no one mentions it; or that 7 to 8 per cent of America’s imported oil comes from Iraq; do you begin to feel the need *to set clear goals and lay out policies aimed at achieving those goals?*¹⁴

The absence or loss of clarity is pervasive, as the consensus on the ‘global coalition for the war against terror’ increasingly becomes a thing of the past. Indeed, the meandering course of the war against terrorism over the past months led the Indian Prime Minister to lament: “It appears that the world is not yet prepared to fight terrorism.”¹⁵

But this should not have been unexpected. It is, in fact, just one of the symptoms of the still limited accommodation of the

¹² Address to Joint Session of Congress & the American People, November 21, 2001,
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

¹³ Fareed Zakaria, “Stop the Babel Over Babylon”, *Newsweek*, New York, September 16-23, 2002.

¹⁴ Harvey Feldman, “Editor’s Introduction”, *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, Number 3, Summer 2002, p. 1.

¹⁵ Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at New York, September 14, 2002, reported on STAR News, September 15, 2002.

nature of terrorism within our strategic perspectives, and of the sheer and enveloping scope of the transformations in the scenario of human security and war that this phenomenon has wrought.

Locating the Enemy

The central thesis of this paper is that the idea of a ‘locus of terrorism’ is one among the conceptual barriers to an effective understanding of, and response to, the unstructured threat of contemporary terrorism; and that this notion is, indeed, a remnant of traditional approaches to conventional warfare, and has tended, in some measure, to distort the character and direction of the global war against terrorism.

The idea of a ‘shift in the locus of terror’ was first proposed in the US State Department’s *Patterns of Global Terrorism Report, 1999*, and in all fairness, referred explicitly to the ‘locus of terrorism directed against the United States’ in its initial conception.¹⁶ But even as it was articulated, the phrase took on a life of its own, and rapidly assumed a universality that may have been absent in its original intent, but that is now part of established theory in terrorism research, analysis and policy projection. Indeed, even as it was projected by the US State Department leadership to the Press, the qualifying clause ‘against the United States’ had a perplexing tendency – perhaps located in superpower hubris – to disappear, and the idea advanced was of a generic “geographical shift of the locus of terror from the Middle East to South Asia,”¹⁷ with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir identified as the new loci and primary sources of extremist Islamic militancy. It was this notion that proliferated with a

¹⁶ The *Report* was first released in April 2000, and stated: “In 1999 the locus of terrorism directed against the United States continued to shift from the Middle East to South Asia.” See

<http://www.usis.usemb.se/terror/rpt1999/asia.html>

¹⁷ Ambassador Michael A. Sheehan, Coordinator for Counterterrorism, US Department of State, Statement for the Record Before the House International Relations Committee July 12, 2000,

<http://www.usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/00071702.htm>. Ambassador Sheehan was echoing Secretary of State Madeline Albright’s earlier statement (of May 1, 2000) that there had been an “eastward shift in terrorism’s center of gravity” towards South Asia. See “US says terrorism threat has shifted from Middle East to South Asia”, CNN.com, May 1, 2000, <http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/05/01/terrorism.report.02/>.

rapidity that imitates the fecundity of terrorism itself, and each afflicted community in widely dispersed regions of the world – though particularly in South, South East and West Asia – claims title to the ‘locus of terrorism’, or seeks to project the current location of its own tormentors as the ‘centre of gravity’ of terrorism. Thus, India’s Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani, recently argued that, “the epicentre of global terrorism had shifted to Pakistan after the fall of Taliban in Afghanistan.”¹⁸ These tendencies have been progressively reinforced by a multiplicity of events in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the campaign in Afghanistan, and the progressive detection of the global network of Islamist terrorism.

The idea of a ‘locus of terror’ is, at least in part, an operational necessity for those who are planning a strategy of response – an allocation of resources is required to cope with the most urgent challenges, and, naturally, the most visible convergence of the ‘enemy forces’ must be located and neutralised. Among the primary challenges of strategic planning in the theory of conventional warfare is the location of the ‘decisive areas’ of the enemy’s concentration, and their domination through an allocation of sufficient, if not overwhelming, force. This approach relies heavily on concepts of depth and mass to secure the ends of policy that war is intended to serve, and is what was witnessed in the US campaigns in Afghanistan after the catastrophic terrorist attacks in the US. Simply put, the enemy must be identified and a location defined if a military campaign is to be planned and executed. Regrettably, while these tactics may remain necessary as a part of the counter-terrorism response, they cannot provide an effective or ample strategy for the defeat of terrorism as, indeed, the Afghan campaign itself demonstrated. It is, consequently, useful to assess some of the difficulties inherent in this notion and the approaches it dictates.

1. The claim of a shift is contrafactual: There is no evidence of any sudden or abrupt ‘shift’, or a radical discontinuity in the situation at the time when the thesis was articulated –

¹⁸ “Pak is epicentre of terror: Advani”, *The Statesman*, New Delhi, October 2, 2002.

Afghanistan's spiral into chaos had been an inexorable fact for over a decade, as had Pakistan's complicity and steady decline. Even a cursory glance at fatalities in Jammu and Kashmir would confirm, moreover, that terrorism had been at comparable – albeit escalating – levels in this theatre for over a decade.¹⁹ If we assess more recent claims of a further 'shift in the locus of terrorism' to South East Asia, we discover, first, that these claims gained currency particularly after the intervention of US troops in counter-terrorism operation in the Philippines and in the wake of rising concern over the kidnapping – primarily for ransom – of Westerners by the principally criminalised Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). It is useful to note, however, that Islamist fundamentalist activities and violence had been a rising feature in the South East Asian region over an extended period, and there is ample evidence of the active development of this theatre, including strong Al Qaeda linkages assiduously developed by Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, since 1988.²⁰ It is important, moreover, to keep in mind Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's somewhat scathing observation that "terrorism is not a franchise only of Al Qaeda."²¹

2. The question also arises as to what constitutes a 'shift'? How are we to locate the locus? Is it the region of the largest concentration of terrorists? Or of their leadership? Or of their activities? A decision in favour of any one or a combination of these criteria would create problems of its own. The concentration of terrorist groups in organised 'training camps' in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, was a deceptive aberration. This is not the manner in which

¹⁹ Total Fatalities: 1990 – 1177; 1991 – 1393; 1992 – 1909; 1993 – 2567; 1994 – 2899; 1995 – 2795; 1996 – 2903; 1997 – 2372; 1998 – 2261; 1999 – 2538; 2000 – 3288; 2001 – 4507; 2002 – 2360 (till October 7). Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/states/jandk/data_sheets/annual_casualties.htm.

²⁰ Zachary Abuza, "Tentacles of Terror: Al Qaeda's Southeast Asian Linkages", paper presented at the Conference on *Transnational Violence and Seams of Lawlessness in the Asia Pacific: Linkages to Global Terrorism*, at the Asia Pacific Centre for Strategic Studies, February 19-21, 2002.

²¹ Interview with Lally Weymouth, *Newsweek*, February 2002.

terrorists forces are ordinarily structured or deployed. The dispersed patterns that have emerged after the US campaign against the Al Qaeda–Taliban combine in Afghanistan, in fact, are more characteristic of the nature of terrorist mobilisation and movement and, while transient concentrations of terrorist operatives and leaders may, from time to time, be evidenced, these are immensely fluid and highly unpredictable manifestations. If our attention fixes on the manifestation of the greatest or, alternatively, the most numerous, or the most devastating terrorist actions, we would, in effect, simply be chasing the trail of small, though lethal, operational groups, often after they have executed their tasks. Would such an orientation, moreover, imply that the ‘locus of terror’ somehow momentarily ‘shifted’ to New York and Washington on 9/11? Evidently, there are insurmountable difficulties with any one of these approaches.

3. There is an additional problem: which terrorism are we speaking of? Islamist Fundamentalist terrorism currently exhausts the entire focus of Western energies and of a burgeoning body of scholarship on the subject. But it is sobering to learn that Sri Lanka has witnessed over 5,617 fatalities in the terrorist conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam just over the period March 2000 and July 2002,²² and an estimated 64,000 persons have lost their lives in this ‘war’ since its commencement in 1983.²³ Nepal has witnessed at least 4,247 fatalities in the conflict with the Maoist extremists between March 2000 and August 10, 2002.²⁴ A multiplicity of insurgencies in India’s Northeast has resulted in at least 12,901 deaths between 1992 and October 6, 2002.²⁵ None of these movements has any connection with the ideologies of extremist Islam; yet most

²² “South Asia Intelligence Review,” vol. 1, no. 8, September 9, 2002, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, http://www.satp.org/satporstp/sair/Archives/1_8.htm#table.

²³ “South Asia Intelligence Review,” vol. 1, no. 16, November 4, 2002, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org/satporstp/sair/Archives/1_16.htm#table.

²⁴ South Asia Intelligence Review, vol. 1, no. 4, August 12, 2002, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org.

²⁵ Compiled from data on the *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org.

of them have an international dimension. By contrast, terrorism in Israel – the earlier ‘locus’ in West Asia which is said to have shifted to South Asia – had resulted in a total of 881 deaths between September 1993 and October 3, 2002.²⁶

Israel is significant on another count. Throughout 1999 and well into 2000, there was a rising rhetoric of ‘permanent peace’ under the Oslo Process, and it was this illusion building²⁷ that had created the context of the ‘shift of the locus of terrorism’ thesis. Yet, within five months of the public articulation of this thesis, the Al Aqsa Intifada carried the Israel–Palestine conflict into a crescendo of violence that still continues.²⁸ Nothing had ‘shifted out’ of West Asia, though there had been a temporary lull in violence. Indeed, in the many examples we mention, what we are speaking of appears more to be a shift in the focus of our (more appropriately, American) attention than a shift in the locus of terrorism.

4. Terrorism is not bound by geography: It is commonplace to note terrorism’s ‘global linkages’, but it is more important to understand that the apparent geographical foci of terrorism are illusory. Military campaigns can sometimes easily exert extraordinary pressure on identified terrorist concentrations – but the ‘successes’ that follow are often deceptive and, at least occasionally, significantly compound the problem. This is the case both within limited theatres of terrorism as well as for the global march of terror. In the Indian Punjab, for instance, where Sikh fundamentalist terrorism raged for nearly a decade and a half, a military operation called Operation Rakshak I brought extraordinary pressure on terrorists operating in what was, in 1989, regarded as their ‘heartland’ in four police districts along the Pakistan border. The operation was widely considered a

²⁶ <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0j5d0>.

²⁷ See K.P.S. Gill and Ajai Sahni, “The J&K ‘Peace Process’: Chasing the Chimera,” *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict & Resolution*, New Delhi, vol. 8, April 2001, esp. pp. 3-6. Also available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume8/Article1.htm>.

²⁸ The ‘shift’ thesis had been published by the US State Department on May 1, 2000. The Al Aqsa Intifada commenced after Ariel Sharon’s visit to Temple Mount on September 28, 2000.

success at the time, but in the absence of a clear policy of containment, it ‘squeezed out’ the terrorists and spread them virtually across the State. It also provoked important tactical transformations in terrorist activity, which had previously concentrated in rural areas, but became increasingly urbanised, and that laid increasing emphasis on improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in crowded public areas in the cities and towns, as against terrorist operations by roving gangs that targeted the security forces and villagers.²⁹ A similar ‘squeeze effect’ has been generated by American operations in Afghanistan, and while crucial damage has been inflicted on the Al Qaeda–Taliban combine, it is also the case that the pressure has resulted in the dispersal of the very significant surviving force of this terrorist axis across the world, and the consequences of this movement are yet to manifest themselves and are, within our current understanding of the dynamics of terror, far from easy to predict. Unlike conventional warfare, consequently, the military domination of territories is of very limited significance in the war against terrorism.

5. Part of the preceding criticism may be met by arguing that the locus of terror is a dynamic entity, and must be neutralised where it is encountered – which was, on some assessments, in West Asia earlier, shifting thereafter to South Asia, and now increasingly visible in South East Asia. But such a notion, even, conceived of as a dynamic and constantly shifting locus, condemns us to a perpetually reactive mode in counter-terrorism policy, following the changing geographical location of the latest concentration of incidents or militant cadres. As Mao Zedong shrewdly noted in his analysis of guerrilla warfare, losing the initiative means to be defeated, to be annihilated. *In fighting a battle you must*

²⁹ K.P.S. Gill, “Endgame in Punjab: 1988-1993,” *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, New Delhi, vol. 1, no. 1, May 2000, esp. pp. 51-52. Also at <http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/publication/faultlines/volume1/Fault1-kpertext.htm>.

*bring the enemy where you want him to be, not run after him.*³⁰

6. The idea of a dynamic locus, moreover, fails to address the generative dynamic which motivates, mobilises, trains, equips and directs the visible actors of the armies of terror – most of whom, if we restrict our attention to the widening web of Islamist terror, are no more than the meaner instrumentalities of the ‘great *jihad*’. It is, thus, dangerous to focus inordinately on the transient geographical location or concentrations of terrorist incidents, activities and movements, to the exclusion of their ideological and material sources, their state sponsors, or their intended targets and proclaimed goals. The error here is the belief, for instance, that the threat of Islamist terrorism is contained within the regions of its most visible manifestation. Extremist Islam (just as any other militant doctrine that may motivate terrorists) must, however, be recognised for its essential character as an ideology, and terrorism as a method that it accepts and justifies. *A method will be adopted wherever it is perceived to have acceptable probabilities of success. An ideology extends wherever it has believers. These are the actual limits or foci of extremist Islamist terrorism.* The identification of the locus of terrorism with the transient geographical location where it finds the largest number of victims, or from where it mounts the most significant of its recent outrages, is a grave error of judgement.³¹ We are dealing, here, with a method; with an evil that transcends its agents and its physical manifestations. Thus, if we focus only on the apparently shifting loci, the processes of mobilisation, of the generation and consolidation of the armies of terror, go on unhindered in other places – often where they are least noticed – till they have assembled the components of their next great excess. As one commentator notes,

³⁰ Mao Zedong, cited in General Tao Hanzhang, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Reference, 1993, p. 56. Emphasis added.

³¹ This point was made earlier in Ajai Sahni, “South Asia: Extremist Islamist Terror and Subversion,” in Gill and Sahni, *The Global Threat of Terror*, p. 184.

Anti-terrorist experts see the real enemy well beyond the dusty Afghan camps targeted by American firepower. They see the planners of international havoc, dressed in suits, going to work each day in office buildings in Baghdad, Damascus, Teheran and even Beirut. U.S. intelligence sources have located the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Germany as sites for planning the Sept. 11 attack. *Hamburg is a special locus for terrorism.*³²

7. A closer analysis would indicate that it is more accurate to speak of the *spread or expansion of the sphere of terrorism*, rather than any dramatic ‘shift’.³³ Indeed, as terrorists and their state sponsors secure even limited successes in one region, their methods are adopted in others, threatening an ever-widening spectrum of nations and cultures. It is, now, increasingly clear that no nation in the world is entirely free of the threat from extremist Islamist terrorism. This includes not only the affluent – or ‘decadent’ as the Islamist would have it – West, and other concentrations of ‘unbelievers’, but also Muslim majority ‘Islamic’ nations that do not conform to the extremist Islamist’s notion of his Faith and its practices. The extremist Islamist vision is not limited to its current sphere of militancy, or to the economic and political jockeying for control of Central Asia that some ‘Great Game’ theorists believe, but to God’s ‘universal empire’. “The world is divided into opposing forces,” Altaf Gauhar insists, “there is no common ground between secularism and Islam.”³⁴ Allah Buksh Brohi is even more explicit:

Many Western Scholars have pointed their accusing fingers at some of the ... verses in the Qur’an to be able to contend that world of Islam is in a state of

³² Robert Novak, “After Afghanistan, Iraq?” October 9, 2001, townhall.com, <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/robertnovak/rn20011009.shtml>. Emphasis added.

³³ This point was made earlier in Ajai Sahni, “South Asia: Extremist Islamist Terror and Subversion,” in Gill and Sahni, *The Global Threat of Terror*, pp. 184-85.

³⁴ Altaf Gauhar, *The Challenge of Islam*, London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978, p. 309.

perpetual struggle against the non-Muslims. As to them it is sufficient answer to make, if one were to point out, that the defiance of God's authority by one who is His slave exposes that slave to the risk of being held guilty of treason and such a one, in the perspective of Islamic law, is indeed to be treated as a sort of that cancerous growth on that organism of humanity, which has been created "Kanafsin Wahidatin" that is, like one, single, indivisible self. It thus becomes necessary to remove the cancerous malformation even if it be by surgical means (if it would not respond to other treatment), in order to save the rest of Humanity... The idea of Ummah of Mohammad, the Prophet of Islam, is incapable of being realised within the framework of territorial states much less made an enduring basis of *viewing* the world as having been polarised between the *world of Islam* and *the world of war*. Islam, in my understanding, does not subscribe to the concept of the territorial state...³⁵

The 'surgical' removal of the 'cancerous malformation' that is the non-Islamic world is what the Islamist terrorists believe they are engaged in.

8. The 'locus' thesis can also result in a perverse and often counter-productive focus on specific terrorist groups or actors, and the Al Qaeda is a case in point. While the enormity of what this group achieved cannot be denied, it is also necessary to note that the inordinate focus on this single organisation, and the virtual iconisation of Osama bin Laden after the US Embassy attacks at Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1988 by the American and international media contributed in no small measure to the larger than life image this organisation and its leadership secured among widely divergent streams of Islamist extremism. This, in turn, resulted in the greater crystallisation of the Pan-Islamist network of terror through increasing linkages with a wide

³⁵ Allah Buksh K. Brohi, "Preface", in Brigadier S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War*, New Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1986, pp. xix-xx.

range of terrorist and fundamentalist groups. Indeed, Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda were, at best, minor players throughout the anti-Soviet campaign and the processes of the consolidation of Islamist extremists in Afghanistan. The key player was, and remained till September 11, 2001, the Pakistani Army and its external intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). As Selig Harrison expressed it much before the 9/11 outrage, “The key to ending the threat from Osama bin Laden and the Taliban does not lie in Afghanistan but in Pakistan...”³⁶ Laden, however, has now assumed a status and iconic presence that, even if he were dead, would cement the forces of Islamist extremist terrorism for some time to come.

9. At a tactical level, the locus thesis can distort responses creating expectations that cannot be met, and provoking clumsy and misdirected initiatives that seek out the enemy where he is not present. At a local level, this is what was seen in at least some operations on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, where US troops resorted to crude actions and indiscriminate operations that harassed civilian populations and undermined assiduously cultivated local intelligence resources.³⁷ At another level, this is again what appears to be happening through the diversion of the ‘global war against terrorism’ into a campaign against Iraq and to unseat or destroy its dictator, Saddam Hussain. Thus, albeit rather quaintly, the physicist James Gordon Prather articulates his anxieties:

If the warhawks disregard the opposition of the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) and the WAT (War against Terrorism) coalition and invade Iraq on the pretext of keeping the nukes Saddam doesn’t have out of the hands of Islamic terrorists who aren’t in Iraq, the chances of those Islamic nukes

³⁶ Selig S. Harrison, “To get at the Taliban, apply pressure on Pakistan,” *The International Herald Tribune*, Paris, March 8, 2001.

³⁷ Colin Soloway, “‘Yelled at Them to Stop’”, *Newsweek*, October 7, 2002, pp. 20-22. Also, “Newsweek: U.S. Special Forces, Witnesses in Eastern Afghanistan Say Operation Mountain Sweep was a Disaster,” September 29, 2002, http://biz.yahoo.com/prnews/020929/nysu009a_1.html

that really are in Pakistan falling into the hands of Islamic terrorists that really are in Pakistan will go way up. So will your chances of getting nuked in your jammies.³⁸

Stated simply, there is a danger, where the enemy is difficult to locate – as is often, if not invariably the case with terrorism –, to invent his location. The initial phases of the US campaign in Afghanistan were deceptively easy, and this was the result of a strategic miscalculation on the part of the Al Qaeda–Taliban combine that allowed the confrontation to assume the character of a conventional war between two considerably unequal forces. This was an aberration in the character of fundamentally terrorist organisations, and where it generated euphoria in the initial phases, it has resulted in deep frustrations subsequently. It is substantially these frustrations that are now triggering a search for an apparently easy and demonstrable victory in Iraq.

10. The locus of terrorism perspective imposes a particular theory and pattern of strategic and tactical responses. Crucially, it predefines the stage of appropriate counter-terrorism intervention at a point well after a particular terrorist concentration has crystallised and secured a high level of lethality – often ignoring the problem till an exceptionally outrageous terrorist attack, or succession of such attacks, makes it impossible to disregard the threat. The identified ‘locus’ also demands a focus of response – in terms of geography or group identity – and this tends to result in a neglect of other, often arbitrarily excluded, ‘non-locus’ or non-priority areas. It is important to notice, in this context, that the human capacity for self-deception is immense, and often, when problems are confusing or overwhelming, we tend to address precisely those areas or components where we feel most capable of securing results, in our own areas of strength. This may well be an element in the American preference for an attack on Iraq, as it certainly was in the

³⁸ James Gordon Prather, “Supercritical Thoughts: It’s Pakistan, Stupid”, *World Net Daily*, August 31, 2002, http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=28793

sheer explosion of Western research and literature on the threat of 'cyber-terrorism' in the pre-9/11 phase.

11. The locus of terrorism perspective also imposes an unrealistic timeframe of response. While there is much talk of a 'long haul' in the war against terrorism, at the operational level, it is the near-term operations that receive priority, while the strategic and ideological responses are often neglected. This results in an overwhelming emphasis on purely military responses but, as one of India's foremost counter-terrorism experts has expressed it, the military has a long record of victories against terrorists, but a poor record of victory against terrorism.³⁹

None of the preceding arguments is intended to suggest that actions against identified concentrations of terrorists, or of prominent groupings of terrorists, are futile, or to be diluted in any way. We will have to continue to fight terrorism wherever we find it. At a tactical level, the identification and neutralisation of all manifestations and concentrations of terrorist activity and force must remain a military, policing and intelligence priority. Nor, indeed, is it my argument that all other aspects of, and trends in, terrorism have been excluded from the concerns of the global war against terrorism. What is suggested, rather, is that the fitfulness and increasing incoherence of the global response to terrorism is, at least in part, a consequence of an inappropriate context of assessment. On the other hand, we find that the enemy's orientation is immensely more focused and functional. It is, consequently, necessary to fight, not where we see a tangible enemy and a high probability of victory, but wherever the imperatives of the war and the nature of the enemy require us to fight for a more palpable and decisive victory.

Defeating the Enemy

It must be amply evident that there can be no simple formulae for a quick fix to the enormity of what terrorism has brought upon us. There can be no easy search for solutions, and if this war is to be

³⁹ K.P.S. Gill, "Approach Paper: Managing Internal Security Threats in India's Northeast," 2002, unpublished.

won, it will have to be fought through a succession of approximations. The most important criterion in our choice of responses will have to be their internal coherence and their consistency with a broad and clearly defined strategic framework based on an accurate assessment of the nature of the enemy and the character of the conflict. This could well require a 'Napoleonic reorganisation' of our strategic perspectives, if we are to bring some order into the theatre of sub-conventional terrorist warfare. In this context, it is necessary to note that, even at a tactical level, the success of an engagement depends overwhelmingly on clearly defining the commander's objectives and intent. And such intent must be firmly rooted in a larger plan and a coherent global strategy. In the absence of such a strategic context, it is impossible for counter-terrorism planners and forces to define and pursue the requisite end state of the 'war against terror', and, while many visible victories may be scored against terrorists, a victory against terrorism would prove elusive. It is, consequently, necessary to define, in concrete terms and not as generalised slogans, the end state we seek to secure in the conflict.

The present and brief study cannot pretend to provide, or even to outline, any such strategic perspective. It is possible, however, to attempt to identify at least some of the elements or considerations that must be accommodated within a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy for the present war against terrorism.

1. The threat of terrorism is unstructured, immensely complex, constantly changing in form and tactic, and significantly unpredictable. To counter it, it will be necessary to confront the full magnitude of the dynamics of terrorism – the proliferation of small arms; the complicity of the arms industry and of its sponsoring or dependant states (a neglected aspect here is that most weapons supplies originate in the West, and all proposals to control the weapons industry and trade have been vigorously resisted by players in at least some of the most prominent members of the international coalition against terrorism); the magnitude of a range of covert operations entered into by the 'free world'; the support to predatory, secretive and authoritarian governments by the 'free world'; geographic and demographic factors;

ideological continuities and discontinuities; flows of finances, areas of passive or covert support to terrorist movements, including both friendly and ‘neutral’ powers; growing linkages with organised crime and opportunistic collusive arrangements with ideologically neutral, or even opposed, political and financial players; etc.

2. The war against terrorism – in its present dominant form, substantially, though not exclusively, a war against global pan-Islamist terror – is an ideological war, and demands responses at the level of ideas. The spread of the ideologies of terror do not necessarily rely on any material transfer of resources or personnel; these ideas and the methods they legitimise are transmitted through channels of free communication, including the popular media. This proliferation of a dangerous and destructive creed will have to be fought and neutralised at the level of ideas. Regrettably, while the ideologies of hatred and violence have, in recent times, been vigorously promoted and liberally funded, the liberal democratic ideology has had very poor advocacy. Indeed, some of the most powerful advocacy of terrorism has come from the liberal fold itself, among those who find ‘justifications’ for Islamist terrorism in past US policies, in historical wrongs, in the alleged suffering of the people who resort to terrorism, and in inchoate ‘root causes’ of terrorism. Mark Steyn, for instance, remarks on “...the European inclination to render terrorism as an impersonal abstraction born of ‘desperation’ and ‘hopelessness’...”⁴⁰

It is now necessary to radically alter the liberal discourse on terrorism, and to recognise the enormity of the threat that contemporary extremist movements pose, not only to specific regimes or nation states, but to the very possibility of the liberal democratic order, and to human civilisation itself. The ‘self-evident truths’ of the ‘rights of man’ are not self-promoting or self-perpetuating. There is a ‘myth of democracy achieved’ that manifests itself in, as Harry Eckstein expresses it, “the bare belief that democracy need

⁴⁰ Mark Steyn, “Dust bin,” *The Spectator*, London, June 29, 2002, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/article.php3?table=old§ion=current&issue=2002-06-29&id=1999>.

only exist to succeed,”⁴¹ but it is necessary to constantly remind ourselves that, “Unless freedoms are extended, they are whittled away.”⁴² It is important, equally, to recognise that this will require an extraordinary effort, that “Truth does not triumph; unless it has champions to propound it, unless it has armies to defend it.”⁴³

3. Such a defence will have to go well beyond persuasion, education and propaganda, and will have to comprehend our own practices. Here, regrettably, there is little consistency in the policies adopted by liberal democracies towards various illiberal and predatory regimes across the world, and, as one commentator notes, it is important to understand that “Terrorism will retreat where democracy advances, not where autocrats muzzle political expression or buy peace at home by financing violence abroad.”⁴⁴ It is, consequently, necessary that the leaders of the liberal West “Don’t ask Third World countries to put up with less democracy than we want for ourselves.”⁴⁵ As US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice candidly admits, “We have to ask how many dictators we should have stopped.”⁴⁶
4. Terrorism is an ideologically neutral and global *method* of warfare: While a single ideological form of terrorism – Islamist fundamentalist terrorism (neglecting its many internal variations) – appears to comprise the most urgent and widespread contemporary threat, it is necessary to recognise that terrorism is in no way uniquely tied to this ideology and has been, and continues to be adopted as a favoured method of warfare and state destabilisation by a wide range of actors who are unrelated to ‘Islamism’. It is consequently necessary to understand that any apparent successes attributed to the

⁴¹ Harry Eckstein, “Lessons for the ‘Third Wave’ from the First: An Essay on Democratisation,” www.democ.uci.edu/democ/papers/lessons.htm.

⁴² Paul Goodman, “Anarchism and Revolution”, *The Great Ideas Today – 1970*, Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, eds., Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1970, p. 46.

⁴³ K.P.S. Gill, *Knights of Falsehood*, New Delhi: Har Anand, 1997, p. 26.

⁴⁴ “Dancing with Dictators,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2002.

⁴⁵ John R. MacArthur, “The Ugly American Mindset,” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, November 6, 2001, reproduced at *Common Dreams News Center*, <http://www.commondreams.org/views01/1106-01.htm>.

⁴⁶ *Time*, September 16, 2002, p. 38.

use of terrorism (and it is equally necessary to understand here that, while movements may not succeed in attaining their ‘ultimate goals’, they can still be perceived as ‘successful’ if they secure a wide range of intermediate ends – one of which is the survival or persistence of the movement itself), produces imitators. In this context, it has rightly been noted: “Terrorism, moreover, is not the problem of its victim societies alone. Its impact reverberates across the globe. A victory for terrorism anywhere in the world is a victory for terrorism everywhere.”⁴⁷ It is no longer possible for nations to respond only when their own interests are targeted. Foreign policies cannot continue to be constructed on near term considerations of the ‘interests of state’. It is now necessary to delegitimise and defeat terrorism in all its manifestations lest it consumes us. David MacIntyre warns, “The future is being determined by our actions today. And the smell of blood could draw a number of scavengers too timid to attack by themselves, adding to our problems and making attribution and retaliation very difficult.”⁴⁸

5. Identify and neutralise the sources of terrorist mobilisation: There are cultures of accommodation and there are cultures of hate. To try to apply the norms of an accommodative culture to a culture of hate is to place the former at a definitive disadvantage, and to yield all initiative to the more vigorous, belligerent, determined and violent side. The cultures of hate – and the many states and regimes that support such cultures – will have to be identified and targeted by a coordinated range of policies that must include coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions, international isolation, and, where necessary, direct, determined and non-discriminatory military intervention. Robin Wright observes: “Osama bin Laden and his wider al-Qaeda network may have undertaken the worst acts of terrorism in modern history. But... they were only bigger, flashier and deadlier than what has been a

⁴⁷ K.P.S. Gill, “Statement on the Launch of the South Asia Terrorism Portal,” March 11, 2000, New Delhi, www.satp.org/satporstp/kpsgill/terrorism/Mar11.htm.

⁴⁸ McIntyre, “We need to study war some more,” “We need to Study War Some More,” *Journal of International Security Affairs*, Summer 2002, p. 7.

steady progression of extremism in the Islamic world over the past three decades.”⁴⁹ It is the ‘steady progression of extremism’ that must be halted. Within this context, there must be a complete ‘denial of deniability’, a refusal to allow sponsors of terrorism to shield behind formalistic defences regarding evidence and definitions of terrorism.

6. Contemporary terrorism has irrevocably altered the character of internal conflicts within nations – these are almost invariably internationalised. Local movements have dovetailed seamlessly into international networks to create an unstructured global threat that severely undermines, and will demand modifications in, notions of state sovereignty and the character and content of international treaties, statutes and legislation. Cooperating nations will have to harmonize their domestic laws and practices, and to enter into international arrangements that enable efficient sharing of intelligence and resources, as well as co-ordinated real time responses against terrorists, their front organisations and their sponsors.
7. Our advantage, Mao Zedong noted in another context, “is to be found in the strategy of a protracted war.”⁵⁰ We will have to change the time frames of our perspectives and policies and understand that this is not a conflict that can be resolved in months or even years. Decades of coordinated effort will elapse before the free world can declare its final victory over the scourge of terrorism. The advantage in this ‘protracted war’, however, lies squarely on the side of the liberal democratic order, despite all its imperfections. Much of the patterns of economic and social organisation in the world today – and this includes the thrust towards globalisation – is mandated by technological transformations, and is substantially irreversible. It is, of course, the case that these patterns have produced severe distortions, and the skewed ‘modernity’ of our age has dispossessed many, and inflicted great suffering on vast regions of the world. This will require correctives but, crucially, these correctives will arise out of the ‘modern’ world itself, not out of a revanchist reaction to

⁴⁹ Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, New York: Touchstone, 2001, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Stuart R. Schram (Trans.), *Mao Tse-Tung: Basic Tactics*, London: Pall Mall Press, 1966, p. 53.

it. The fact is, the Islamist extremists offer “utopian solutions virtually impossible to provide... in practical terms, it (Islam) is no panacea to instantly cure all societies’ ills.”⁵¹

The various streams of terrorism today, with their roots in substantially contrived religious and ethnic identities, do not propose ‘solutions’ on the basis of a constructive vision of an alternative future, but instead seek escape in a fictional past. While they are manifestly capable of inflicting substantial harm and suffering on their target societies, they lack the strategies and means to transform and empower their own people. This is precisely because the alternative societies they seek to create are incapable of generating the intellectual, material, social and political resources for the tasks of modern state-building or social reconstruction. Thus,

Freedom, interpreted to mean national independence, was seen as the great talisman that would bring all other benefits. The overwhelming majority of Muslims now live in independent states, but this has brought no solutions to their problems.⁵²

The fact is, the patterns of economic activity and growth that underpin all power in the modern – and increasingly globalised – world, cannot be sustained by groupings that seek “smaller worlds within borders that will seal them off from modernity.”⁵³ The inexorable truth is that contemporary technological imperatives and the corresponding intellectual demands they impose on dynamic societies – and not just ‘US hegemony’, though the hegemon is an inescapable fact of our age – have imposed very high levels of integration and interdependence on the international order; and systems and societies that seek to insulate themselves from this trend eventually and inevitably disempower themselves. It is “not possible to simultaneously sustain a thrust towards

⁵¹ Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*, New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 1985, p. 289.

⁵² Bernard Lewis, “What Went Wrong?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Boston, January 2002, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/01/lewis.htm>.

⁵³ Benjamin R. Barber, “Jihad vs. McWorld”, *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1992, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/foreign/barberf.htm>.

international globalisation and regional or local ‘ghettoisation’.”⁵⁴

Significantly, as Olivier Roy correctly notes, the apparently ‘anti-modern’ Islamist networks are inevitably linked up with the globalised world – irrespective of their ideological predilections and antipathies:

Even in a traditional society such as Afghanistan, the network that develops around a smalltime local commander, himself plugged into an “international” network for the circulation of goods (arms, and sometimes drugs), is no longer the clan that existed before, but a recomposition of the traditional segmentation around a new political elite and the globalised flow of wealth.⁵⁵

The liberal democratic world, consequently, with all its imperfections, retains the greater power to resolve the deficiencies of the emerging world order. This power is compounded with the passage of time, and the world has seen a continuous trend over the past decades, to the progressive weakening and marginalisation of authoritarian and extremist cultures. This latter progression, of course, creates its own impulses to violence and disruption, but this is the reaction of the disadvantaged – those who are excluded to suffer “the frustration inherent in an unattainable consumerist world”⁵⁶ – not the initiative of those who possess the means for transformation.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ajai Sahni, “Gujarat: Communal Ghetto or Global Enterprise?”, in M.L. Sondhi and Apratim Mukarji, eds., *The Black Book of Gujarat*, Delhi: Manak Publications, p. 65.

⁵⁵ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁷ These themes have been explored in greater detail in Ajai Sahni, *Democracy, Violence & Transformation: Exploring the Limits*, [forthcoming title]; and also, with particular reference to Islamist extremism, in Ajai Sahni, “Al Qaeda’s Strategic Reach in India,” Paper presented at the International Conference on “Transnational Violence and Seams of Lawlessness in the Asia-Pacific”, organised by the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, US DoD, Honolulu, February 19-21, 2002, [forthcoming publication].

Finally, when we draft our strategy to defeat the “prairie fire of *jihadi* terrorism spreading across the world,”⁵⁸ we must explicitly confront the rather obvious reality that the essence of terrorism is *terror*. Terrorists exploit our inordinate fears of what they can do in order to paralyse our responses and sow confusion in our minds; they encourage our mistaken belief that if we do not respond, or if we conciliate, appease, enter into ‘rational engagement’,⁵⁹ the terror will de-escalate; the belief that we can somehow bribe this relentless and utterly ruthless enemy to stop murdering our women and children. But the one principle that stands out clearly is that there can be no compromise with terrorists; all such compromises reward terrorism. Fitful policies seeking negotiations with terrorists, with their front organisations and their sponsoring states, have only helped entrench these groups, creating an alternative sphere of a violent, murderous politics that is fundamentally a negation of democracy and the principles that sustain the international community. An extraordinary and unwavering determination in the leadership of the world is now necessary in order to defeat terrorism, and the time available to build the international consensus that must underlie such determination is severely limited.

⁵⁸ B. Raman, “The Prairie Fire of Jehadi Terrorism,” South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No. 538, 24.10.2002, <http://www.saag.org/papers6/paper538.html>.

⁵⁹ Steve Coll, “Mr. Armitage, as they say here: Your’re most welcome,” LA Times-Washington Post, reproduced in *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, May 29, 2002.