
Violence in Northeast and Central India: Extremism or Terrorism?

SK Saini

One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

- Popular saying

Introduction

The above cliché aptly reflects the dilemma faced by the world today in defining terrorism. Despite many efforts, there has never been an internationally accepted definition of terrorism. However, a range of possible legal definitions of terrorism exists. While we describe the violence in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as terrorism, in the northeast and Naxal affected areas, it is referred to as insurgency and left-wing extremism, respectively. This article makes a case to label the violence in the northeast and Naxal affected areas also as terrorism.

Changing Meaning of Terrorism

The word “terrorism” has brazenly intruded into the lives of common people, forcing many schools in India to impart terrorism management lessons to their students. Most people associate it with mindless violence in which innocent people are killed. The word terrorism was first popularised during the French Revolution.¹ Interestingly, it had a positive connotation at that time. The “system or *regime de la terreur* of 1793-94”, from which the English word originated, was used as a means to establish order by the state during the turbulence that followed the revolution of 1789. From state-directed violence, it embraced in its ambit the activities of violent revolts by various non-state nationalist and ethnic separatist groups over the years. These revolutionary connotations reflect the

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meaning with which it is commonly associated at present. As the meaning and usage of the word have changed over time to accommodate the political discourse of various eras, a universally acceptable definition of terrorism has proved elusive.

International Approach to Terrorism

The UN has been spearheading the counter-terrorism campaign at the international level since the 1970s. The UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 3034 in 1972, following the massacres at Lod airport in Israel, and at the Olympic Games in Munich. In this resolution, the General Assembly decided to establish an ad hoc committee on terrorism, with a mandate to submit recommendations for the speedy elimination of international terrorism². However, this ad hoc committee could not make any substantial progress due to widely varying positions adopted by the West and the Third World. The West was apprehensive that a definition of terrorism could include state terrorism, which the Third World countries defined as acts prosecuted by states against the sovereignty of other states, particularly smaller states, through the use of force, economic blockade or threatening the security and sources of wealth of the smaller states. On the other hand, the Third World countries insisted that the violent acts of recognised national liberation movements as part of their struggle to achieve self-determination and independence should be excluded from any definition of international terrorism. Consequently, the committee could not even draft a definition of terrorism.

In the interim, despite the constraints of divided positions on the issue of terrorism, a number of international conventions to prohibit acts of terror like hijacking of aeroplanes or ships, hostage taking and attacks on internationally protected persons, were concluded. This approach reflected the resolve of the international community to criminalise acts of terror as they occurred. The underlying reasons for a lack of consensus on a uniform definition of terrorism stems from the insistence of the countries to retain the decision-making authority to decide what constituted terrorism. Some of the nations, like Pakistan, perceive violence as a means of effecting desired transformations and are sympathetic to specific political causes or domestic political sensitivities.

Indian Perspective on Terrorism

In India, a need was felt to deal with terrorism by having special laws and accordingly, the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (2001) and its successor, an Act (2002) were promulgated. However, this was later repealed and its main provisions

incorporated into the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. These legal instruments also attempt to define terrorist acts rather than terrorism as follows:

Whoever, with intent to threaten the unity, integrity, security or sovereignty of India or to strike terror in the people or any section of the people in India or in any foreign country, does any act by using bombs, dynamite or other explosive substances or inflammable substances or firearms or other lethal weapons or poisons or noxious gases or other chemicals or by any other substances (whether biological or otherwise) of a hazardous nature, in such a manner as to cause, or likely to cause, death of,

or injuries to, any person or persons or loss of, or damage to, or destruction of, property or disruption of any supplies or services essential to the life of the community in India or in any foreign country or causes damage or destruction of any property or equipment used or intended to be used for the defence of India or in connection with any other purposes of the Government of India, any State Government or any of their agencies, or detains any person and threatens to kill or injure such person in order to compel the Government in India or the Government of a foreign country or any other person to do or abstain from doing any act, commits a terrorist act.

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The doctrine for sub-conventional operations of the army defines terrorism as the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence against people or property to terrorise, coerce or intimidate governments or societies; this is most often resorted to with the aim of achieving political, religious, or ideological objectives³. Terrorism thrives on a fear psychosis and could be employed as a part of an insurrectionist movement or independently. It could be achieved by arson, sabotage, hijacking, hoaxes, maiming, bombing, seizure, kidnapping, assassination, taking hostages, raids, ambushes and the threat to use or use of weapon of mass destruction (WMD).⁴

Analysis of Definitional Elements of Terrorism

There are five elements that are identifiable in various definitions of terrorism, although disagreement over the formulation of these elements explains the

inability to reach consensus on a definition at the international level. These include intent, motivation, means, targets and actors.

- The intent element requires that premeditated action be undertaken to instill terror, coerce, or influence a population, government or group.
- In addition to the terrorist intent element, many terrorism definitions require that the terrorist actors stipulate identifiable political, social, ideological or religious motives. Others have no motivation requirements whatsoever.
- While the means adopted by terrorists were limited to violence or threat of violence, the scope has expanded to include other forms of criminal conduct, including non-violent forms such as cyber attacks.
- The targets of terrorists include human beings (an entire population, a sub-group, or individual), property, infrastructure and other economic and social interests that pose serious dangers to human life or economic or social order. Moreover, human targets are further limited to civilians or non-combatants. Terrorist targets can be either directed or indiscriminate and the act is merely symbolic – the propaganda of the deed – rather than as part of a planned attrition.
- The actors who perpetrate terrorism may be individuals, sub-state groups, states themselves, or other actors.

A classic definition is given by Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*: "terror is an intense overpowering fear" and terrorism is "the use of terrorizing methods of governing or resisting a government". This simple definition focusses on the use of violence that is used illegally, extra-constitutionally, to coerce, irrespective of whether a government or non-state group uses it. It omits motivation and steers clear of the debate of whether the cause is just or unjust.

Essence of Terrorism

The emotive term terrorism should be understood by the nature of the act, not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of the cause. Terrorism is violence, or the threat of violence, calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm. Terrorists follow Sun Tzu's dictum – kill one, frighten 10,000. The motives of most terrorists are political, and their actions are generally carried out in a way that will achieve maximum publicity. The perpetrators are usually members of an organised group and, unlike normal criminals, they often claim credit for their acts. Finally, terrorist acts are often intended to produce effects beyond the immediate physical damage they cause, with over-reaction by security forces being a particular bonus.

There is nothing new about terrorism; it is a traditional tactic of the revolutionary. It is important to remember that terrorism is a method – a particularly heinous and damaging one – rather than a set of adversaries or the causes they pursue. All concepts of revolutionary warfare make use of terrorism to publicise the movement, to punish citizens loyal to the government, to demoralise the government, to coerce the uncommitted, to polarise society and to enforce obedience and discipline among members of their own organisation.

J&K

The conceptual lines between terrorism and other forms of politically driven violence are usually blurred. In J&K, the violence has been a blend of terrorist attacks against civilians and guerrilla warfare against the security forces right from its inception in 1989. The targeting philosophy depends largely on tactical factors such as the physical vulnerabilities of the targets and the local capabilities of the terrorist groups. There have been discernable changes in the violence, as has been classified over the years in J&K. Initially, it was referred to as the activities of anti-national elements, later as militancy and, finally, as terrorism. The change to call it terrorism was made as the world was waking up to the manifestations and dangers of international terrorism. It also suited our national interests to highlight to the world community, the sinister designs of Pakistan in abetting cross-border terrorism.

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Northeast

The strategic northeastern part of India is encircled from three directions by Bhutan and China from the north, Myanmar from the east and Bangladesh from the south and west. This region comprises seven states, popularly called the seven sisters: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya, with porous borders with all neighbouring countries except China. Insurgency surfaced in Nagaland in the mid-Fifties, then in Mizoram in the Sixties, followed by Manipur in the Seventies and in Tripura and Assam in the Eighties. Two

districts of Arunachal Pradesh – Tirap and Changlang — have also been experiencing some violence lately. The strategic location of the region, easy access of the disaffected groups to neighbouring countries having ethnic similarity, material and moral support of foreign governments and intelligence agencies of Pakistan and Bangladesh have to a large extent facilitated insurgency in the region. The external involvement has been in the form of training, provision of arms, financial assistance and safe sanctuaries. For many decades, insurgency in the northeastern part of India followed the text-book principles of classic insurgencies. The insurgents did not target innocent civilians indiscriminately, refrained from destroying infrastructural facilities and were not loath to developmental initiatives by the government. Due to strong tribal and cultural affiliations, the local population was also supportive of the insurgency movements.

At present, except Mizoram and Meghalaya which are largely peaceful, most other states have low grade insurgencies. There is an emphasis on extortion and levying of taxes to boost the availability of funds. Due to this, support of the local population for the insurgent groups is also waning. Since the ceasefire came into effect in Nagaland, violence is largely restricted to inter-group clashes amongst various Naga groups, aimed at increasing their areas of dominance. Assam continues to experience event related upsurge of violent activities, especially during Independence and Republic Day celebrations, mainly at the hands of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). While the writ of the government has been reestablished in the so-called “liberated zones” in south Manipur, the situation remains a cause for concern due to multiple actors aligned along ethnic and tribal distinctions. Violent activities in Tripura at times are politically motivated. The illegal migration of Bangladeshis into Assam and Tripura has also acquired alarming proportions and is complicating the situation due to demographic inversion. Media reports indicate that Muslim fundamentalist organisations are joining hands with the insurgents and disgruntled elements of the society to raise anti-India tirades or separatist movements in the region. There is also a threat to the land link of the northeast with the rest of India – the narrow Siliguri Corridor. Large consignments of narcotics from the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia also flow into the region, leading to a growing nexus between insurgents and transnational criminals. In addition, Bangladesh is fast emerging as a safe haven for Islamist terrorists and involvement of groups like Harkat-ul-Jehadi-al Islam (HUJI) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) of Bangladesh in terrorist acts within India is already being suspected. Terrorist bases or camps of Indian groups also continue to exist in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The original character of insurgent movements in the northeast has transformed into an explosive mix of criminal activities, including kidnapping, extortion and narcotics trade, and terror. Moreover, the contours of the *modus operandi* and targeting philosophy of the insurgents have also changed over a period of time. The insurgents are now indulging in indiscriminate violence by resorting to grenade lobbing, planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in crowded places, and even directed violence against sections of the society – the so-called

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outsiders. This is borne out by the increasing number of fatalities suffered by the civilians in the northeast. During the year 2007, there were 453 civilians killed in violent activities in the northeast as against 231 in 2006.⁵ Insurgents are also blocking roads by mining them extensively and establishing or instigating economic blockades, activities unheard of in the northeast earlier.

Naxal Violence

While left-wing extremism or Naxalism is a socio-economic problem, aimed to bring in a revolutionary democracy, it has assumed alarming proportions. The Naxals have acquired significant capabilities to launch multiple coordinated attacks, executed with military precision by a large strength of cadres after detailed planning, reconnaissance and notable synergy. They have IED manufacturing units to maintain a continuous supply and wreak havoc against the civilians as well as security forces in the affected areas. Destruction of infrastructure, levying of taxes and cess on narcotics plantations are being resorted to with impunity. The Naxals are also known to have domestic, regional and international linkages. They have membership of the Revolutionary International Movement, Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties of South Asia and widely publicised contacts with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isaak Muivah (NSCN-IM) and ULFA. It is only a matter of time that the ISI will step in to exploit the situation to its advantage, with the aim of achieving its objective of destabilising India.

Need for Reclassifying Extremism by Naxals and North-east Militants as Terrorism

Without sounding alarmist, it needs to be appreciated that the deteriorating situation in the northeast and Naxal affected areas is a national security problem and needs to be addressed urgently. It cannot be treated as a mere law and order problem for which the states are responsible. Since most of the insurgent movements in the northeast have been marginalised, it has dawned on them that they cannot defeat the security forces and achieve their ideological aims. Therefore, they have transformed themselves into terror networks and converged with criminal elements. The convergence with criminals is largely due to substantial increase in their funding needs. This conceptual shift needs to be recognised and the state response accordingly tailored and appropriately directed. An analysis of the *modus operandi* and targeting philosophy of the insurgents in the northeast and Naxals in the affected areas also makes it apparent that they are using terror tactics to threaten the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the country. Also, under the existing legal instruments of the country, their violent activities meet the entire criteria to be classified as terrorist acts. However, an analysis of the spin-offs that will accrue from such a change is in order to develop the argument that the requirement transcends beyond symbolism and mere semantics.

- The government is often criticised for failing to evolve a national strategy to deal with terrorism in the country. At the apex level, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is the nodal ministry for the national counter-terrorism effort. Within the MHA, the Department of Internal Security deals with terrorism, Naxalism and other similar threats.⁶ There are separate departments for J&K and Border Management. At present, the issue of extremism and terrorism in India is being viewed and responded to in water-tight compartments based on regional distinctions – J&K, northeast, Naxal affected areas and the rest of India. While it is understood that situational and local dynamics vary widely in each of these geographic entities, articulation of an overarching, integrated and holistic approach to deal with extremism and violence in the country will overcome the deficiencies pointed out in the national counter-terrorism response. Eliminating different labels to distinguish various shades of violence across the regions of the country will make a good beginning.
- A UN report on India's anti-terrorism preparedness has stated that the country's laws on terrorism do not fully comply with UN Resolution 1373.⁷ The report mentions that "many of the problems faced by India's current counter-

terrorism regime could be tackled if India were to adopt comprehensive terrorism legislation.” The report alludes to major gaps between the work of the prosecution agencies at the Union and state levels. Also, there is no legislation enabling special investigative techniques like the use of electronic or other forms of surveillance and undercover operations. Lack of a comprehensive legislation on terrorism is partly due to the absence of a political consensus on the issue. Classifying violence in the northeast and Naxal areas will facilitate movement towards creating a national consensus on the issue.

- There are already reports of operational, logistic and training coordination between the Naxals and militant groups in the northeast. Besides, all these groups have well developed external linkages. In order to launch a diplomatic offensive to restrain external support, it will be in our national interest to label their activities as terrorism.

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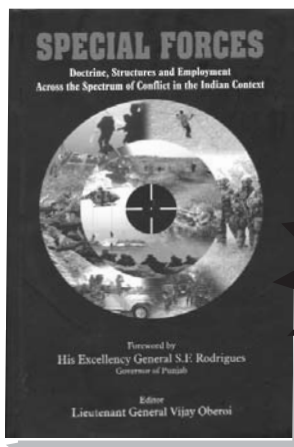
Conclusion

Absence of a national policy on terrorism complicates the task of sending consistent messages to the extremist groups, people of the country and the international community about the declared intent of the country to effectively deal with this menace. Irrespective of the root causes, use of violence and terror tactics by any section of the people needs to be viewed uniformly and dealt with firmly.

Notes

1. Bruce Hoffman, “Defining Terrorism”, in Russell D Howard, Reid L Sawyer (eds.), *Terrorism and Counter Terrorism – Understanding the New Security Environment*, (McGraw Hill Contemporary Learning Series, Second Edition, 2006), p. 4.
2. Jae-myong Koh, *Suppressing Terrorist Financing and Money Laundering* (Berlin-Hiedelberg: Springer, 2006), pp. 32-33.

3. *Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations*, p. 65.
4. *Indian Army Doctrine*, p. 17.
5. "Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in India's Northeast", South Asia Terrorism Portal, Institute for Conflict Management at <http://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/fatalitiesnortheast2006.htm>
6. Ministry of Home Affairs at http://www.mha.nic.in/about_mha.htm.
7. "India Lacks Capability to Win Terror War: UN," *Hindustan Times*, October 04, 2007. On September 28, 2001, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1373 to establish a permanent counter-terrorism legal and executive infrastructure within the international community, with the aim of raising the average threshold of government performance against terrorism.



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