

This article is related to General Studies Paper -II (Internal Security)

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"The world needs to be united on the issue of terrorism and resolve contradictions in the fight."

The brutal attacks on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, for which the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility, have reignited discussion on the global 'War on Terror'. Scholars and officials across the world are studying the links of the bombers to the IS's former 'Caliphate' in Syria, where at least two of the bombers are believed to have travelled, and several leaders have now called for a greater focus on the global dimensions of the counter-terrorism effort. The attacks in Sri Lanka, however, also underline the many cracks in the concept of a global 'War on Terror', and raise questions on what it has achieved in the time since the term was coined by former U.S. President George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks in 2001.

A floundering war

First, the original mission that the War on Terror was named for is floundering. Not only has the coalition of about 60 countries that sent troops and offered logistical support for 'Operation Enduring Freedom' failed to end terrorism in Afghanistan, it appears it is preparing to hand the country back to the oppressive Taliban regime that it defeated in December 2001. This, despite the fact there is no guarantee that the terror groups living in safe havens in Pakistan will not also have the run of Afghanistan once the coalition pulls out.

The war in Afghanistan was only one of the many coalitions the U.S. led in the name of the War on Terror: 46 nations joined the 'coalition of the willing' to defeat Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, and 19 were a part of the coalition that ousted Muammar Qaddafi from power in Libya in 2011. The U.S. and allied countries were sidetracked by the 'Arab Spring' in 2011, which led them to bolster anti-Bashar al-Assad groups in Syria. This eventually paved the way for the IS to establish a 'Caliphate' in territories in Syria and Iraq. The next coalition was formed to fight the terror of the IS. The number of global terror attacks (maintained in a Global Terrorism Database by the University of Maryland of events from 1970 to 2018) per year went up from 1,000 in 2004 to 17,000 in 2014. It is clear that the countries in question — Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Iraq — are far from free of the spectre of terrorism. Despite the defeat of the 'Caliphate' territorially, the IS or its franchises are appearing in new parts of the world. Sri Lanka is the latest on that list.

Second, rather than helping fight pan-Islamist terror groups, the War on Terror appears to help the IS and al-Qaeda more, giving them a footprint far bigger than their actual abilities. This helps them recruit and radicalise Muslim youth from around the globe, and allows them to own terrorists around the world as their own, as IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did in a rare video posted shortly after the Easter Sunday attacks.

Not a ‘fight for Islam’

Third, the narrative they build of a “fight for Islam” is equally false. According to the Global Terrorism Database, of the 81 terror attacks in which more than 100 were killed (high casualty) since 2001, more than 70 were carried out in Islamic or Muslim-majority countries. In a specific search of high casualty terror attacks on religious institutions since 2001, 18 of the top 20 were by Islamist groups on mosques. The War on Terror thus appears to be a concept peddled mostly by pan-Islamist groups and propagated most often by extremists of other religions as a motive for terror attacks, such as the 2011 Utoya island attack in Norway or the New Zealand attacks this year. Governments in countries affected by terrorism must not subscribe to this narrative blindly.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the reason the members of the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) were successful in their diabolical plot had as much to do with the fact that intelligence inputs given by India were ignored as it did with the fact that since the defeat of the LTTE, Sri Lankan authorities had let their guard down and ignored growing internal fault lines. As a result, despite complaints about the speeches that suspected mastermind Mohamed Zahran Hashim made as a preacher of a mosque in Sri Lanka’s Eastern province, he went unchallenged. Police and intelligence agencies also failed to keep a stern eye on other NTJ bombers who were IS returnees, despite the fact that only about 32 Sri Lankans in all are believed to have travelled to IS territory.

Approaches to fighting terror

Fourth, it is necessary for countries fighting terrorism to learn more closely from their differences, rather than try to generalise from experience. Comparing European states like the U.K., France and Belgium, where hundreds of immigrant Muslims have enlisted for the IS, to South Asian states like India, where Muslim populations are indigenous and only a few dozen are believed to have left for Syria, is akin to comparing apples and oranges. Indian officials have also claimed a higher success in deradicalising IS returnees, because they have enlisted whole families, neighbourhoods and local Maulvis in their efforts. In Bangladesh too, after the 2016 attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery, government advertisements asked mothers to check on their children’s activities. This acknowledgement that radicalised terrorists are a part of a community is in stark contrast to the current debate in many European countries that are refusing to take IS returnees and their families back. Similarly, several Central Asian states propagate a much more hard-line approach on counter-radicalisation, by banning beards and hijabs, while China’s re-education internment camps in Xinjiang have raised questions about human rights. The success or failure of each of these approaches must be studied before deciding their applicability elsewhere.

Fifth, the world community must address contradictions in the War on Terror. For 20 years, the world has failed to agree on a common definition of terrorism at the United Nations. This has held up the passage of the Indian-sponsored proposal for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Despite the fact that Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar has been targeting Indians incessantly for years, they must ask why China allowed his UN Security Council designation as a global terrorist only after mentions of his attacks in India were removed. They must ask why the U.S. is focused on billing Iran the “world’s biggest state sponsor of terrorism”, while states like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that have funded and sheltered Islamist terror groups are still treated as “frontline allies” on terror. And why, despite all their resources and expertise, the alliance of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand that share global intelligence was unable to see the impending threat in Sri Lanka. Unless the world is truly united on the issue and resolves such contradictions, the global War on Terror will only be as strong as its weakest link.

The Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)

What is it?

- This draft was prepared by India in the year 1996, which provides comprehensive and integrated legal framework against terrorism.
- CCIT provides a legal framework that imposes this obligation on signatory countries that they will not provide financial assistance or shelter to terrorist organizations.
- There is a provision that there should be a universal definition of terrorism, which would include all member states of the United Nations General Assembly in its criminal law.

an objective

- For the universal definition of terrorism all 193 members of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) will adopt this criminal law.
- To ban all terrorist groups and stop terrorist camps.
- To prosecute all terrorists under special laws.
- Declaring cross-border terrorism at the global level as an extraditable offense.
- Illegal Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967

What is it?

- This law was made for effective prevention of illegal activities in India.

- Its main purpose is to use legal power for anti-national activities.
- According to this act, if any anti-nationalist movement supports or supports a claim on the territory of India made by a foreign country, then it will be considered a crime.
- It was passed in 1967. Later it was first revised in 2008 and again in 2012.

Some disputed provisions of the Act

- The definition of terrorism in this is not so clear. Therefore, non-violent political activities and political opposition also come under the definition of terrorism.
- If the government bans calling an organization as a terrorist then it becomes a criminal act to be a member of such an organization.
- According to this act, anyone can be arrested for 180 days without charge sheet and police custody of 30 days can be taken.
- There is difficulty in getting bail and there is no question of advance bail.
- In this, on the strength of evidence, any crime is treated as a terrorist offense.
- Special courts are formed within this Act which has the right to hear the closure and can also use the secret witnesses.

Committed To

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements about Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT).

1. This draft was prepared by United Nations in 1996.
2. It provides unified and comprehensive law structure against terrorism.
3. Its objective is to prohibit all terrorist groups and terrorist camps.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) All of the above

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. The recent attack on Sri Lanka has identified many shortcomings of the thinking of war on global terror. Which type of steps should be taken to remove these shortcomings? Discuss. (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 11 May. is 1 (a)