

Religious Radicalism in Central Asia and its implications for India

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Abstract

As it is very well-known that Central Asia's importance for India lies in its geo-strategic location which forces India to expand its strategic relations with Central Asian Republics. For India's interest, Central Asia becomes a key player because of its two major worries viz. Pakistan's expanding influence over Afghanistan and beyond and the threat of a growing belt of fundamentalism and its sponsoring of cross-border terrorism. The threat of instability caused by the forces of religious radicalism and cross border terrorism has impeded the growth of democratic institutions and civil society in Central Asia which itself has larger implications for a democratic country like India so far as its larger foreign policy is concerned. Furthermore, the victory of Taliban in almost the whole of Afghanistan has opened the doors of new possibilities for the fundamentalists and both India and Central Asia have come under increasing pressure which in fact should propel India and the Central Asian countries to come closer than before. In fact, India possesses the potential to serve as a potential base for neutralizing security threats in the region. Here actually lies the larger interest of India as Central Asia assumes a significant place in its regional security calculus, especially in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Likewise, the penetration of extremist forces into Central Asia can have serious security implications for India because of its proximity to PoK and the likely impact of this on the situation in Kashmir. Hence, this paper will attempt to highlight how India and Central Asia face common threats and challenges of terrorism, extremism and separatism, drug trafficking and trafficking in general in the region. The commonality of interest provides greater opportunity to cooperate more closely in addressing the regional security issues of extremism and terrorism. The increasing violence in Pakistan, emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan and the proposed withdrawal of US forces in 2014, all are likely to have serious security implications for both India and Central Asia. Thus, the argument in this paper would be that cooperation on security issues as well as in countering cross-border terrorism is of prime importance for both India and Central Asia.

Keywords: Religion, Radicalism, Security Mechanism

Introduction

Today, religion is being used as a tool to unite and mobilize people in a radicalized manner. Religion is also being used to dominate politics, education, way of life and even thinking. In popular view, religious radicalism refers to extremely violent acts in the name of religion. However, religious radicalism or religious extremism is not defined by violent acts alone. There are different aspects of religious radicalism like the drive to expand the religious law of a

particular sect, the attitude of radical elements towards members who do not accept the laws and views of extremists and the rejection (by extremists) of values that are not native to the religion and the rigorous inculcation of values that are a part of the religion.

Islam is the predominant religion of all of Central Asian states. But Islam in Central Asia is not a monolithic one though the majority of Central Asian people belong to Hanafi School or Madhaba School of Sunni Islam. It is needless to say that the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 allowed for the revival of Islam in Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The collapse of Communism and opening of state borders not only offered Central Asian Muslims new opportunities to practice their faith, but also allowed for the importation and development of radical forms of Islam. Hence, it is important to find out in detail as to what led to the growth of religious radicalism in these countries (Rashid 2002).

Factors responsible for the growth of religious radicalism

There is no single factor which is completely responsible for religious radicalism in Central Asia. There are various causes which are all together responsible for its growth. The bloody civil war in Tajikistan, which ended in 1997, was the region's first experience of a home-grown Islamicist movement trying to seize political power even though the spread of radical Islamic political movements in Tajikistan in the 1980s was very much a result of the growing interaction between Afghanistan and Tajikistan during Soviet occupation. There are different views regarding the growth of religious radicalism. There is no uniform strand on this. Some argues that tension is caused by the secular state's wholesale exclusion or marginalization of Muslims. Another group argues that tension is the work of global extremist groups espousing the creation/restoration of an Islamic Caliphate (Rashid 2002). The third view is that rising tension is part of a broader trend – a putative clash of Western and Muslim civilizations (Huntington 1993). The fourth explanation emphasizes differences in access to resources by various Muslim communities. However, none of these explanations takes account of local causes for the Growth of religious radicalism. However, the causes of the growth of religious radicalism can be fully understood by dividing them into two major parts viz. external factors and internal factors.

External Factors Responsible for the Growth of Religious Radicalism

- 1) **Collapse of Soviet Union:** The disintegration of Soviet Union created an ideological vacuum. Penetration of radical ideas, literature and the rise of Islamist organisations became possible under Gorbachev's "perestroika" where more opportunities emerged for the people to mobilize (Olimov 2011). After independence, Islamic missionaries from Saudi Arab, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and many other Islamic countries had found their way into Central Asian countries. In addition to providing funding and religious training to support mosques and Madrassas, these sources distributed free copies of the Qur'an, which had been translated into Russian and other Central Asian languages (Rashid 2002).
- 2) **Afghanistan and Taliban:** There is a direct link between Afghanistan and Central Asian republics because of their geographical proximity. Islamic revivalism in Central Asia became noticeable with Gorbachev coming to power in 1985 but radical ideologies were imported from other Muslim countries. More prominent among them was Afghanistan. So any type of threats which Afghanistan faces, simultaneously will affect Central Asia. Afghanistan is source of arms, narcotics and training to radical groups which provides resources and fuel to radicals in Central Asia. Rise of Taliban in Afghanistan was not

unknown to the world which possessed a great threat not only for Afghanistan but also to Central Asia.

- 3) Sources in Saudi Arabia were prime contributors to the rise of Islam in Central Asia. In early 1990's, Saudis funded the Islamic movement called Adolat (Justice), a movement that originated in the Uzbek territory of the Ferghana Valley. Leaders of this movement then fled to Tajikistan where they helped anti-government forces prepare for a civil war in Tajikistan. Foreign sources also supported the education of other extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir, who trained abroad and then exported their jihadist ideologies into Central Asia to mobilize popular support (Fredholm 2003).
- 4) The construction of roads connecting Tajikistan with China, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan and expansion of ties with other countries in Middle East and South Asia had a stimulating effect not only on rapid growth in the volume of transportation, commercial and human traffic flows but also by encouraging the inflow of ideas from foreign Islamic movements.
- 5) The introduction of new technologies such as internet and mobile telephone communication as well as intensification of economic, cultural and inter-personal ties with other Muslim countries placed Tajikistan within the sphere of global Islamic movement which had larger implications for the other Central Asian countries as far as the growth of religious radicalism was concerned.

Internal Factors Responsible for the Growth of Religious Radicalism

However, the above mentioned external factors are not sufficient in and of themselves to explain the growth of religious radicalism. If there were not fertile ground for the radicalization of Islam in Central Asia, foreign radical elements would have been unable to attract support among the local populations. After the disintegration of Soviet Union Central Asian states have undergone profound economic and political changes. Ahmed Rashid has very rightly argued that poverty is the root cause of this problem. So long as poverty and unemployment increases and economic opportunities decrease the Central Asian states provide fertile ground for any radical organization to operate. Immediately following the collapse of communism, Central Asian leaders initiated the restoration of mosques and other symbols of Islam as a means of distinguishing themselves from the Soviet system and increasing their legitimacy among the local population (Turker 2011).

However religious sentiment of Central Asian people was not handled carefully by the rulers of this region. Instead the highly centralized, Post-Soviet Central Asian rulers adopted repressive measures which created internal unrest situation where different radical groups operating in the neighbouring states could easily support for their cause. The government of these countries are making attempts to impose tighter control over all aspects of religious life. Frustration and discontent arise from a lack of participation, oppressive regimes, widespread corruption, and the pressure of patronage networks. Exclusion or inclusion from the political system plays a powerful role in radicalizing movements (Turker 2011). After independence, the same elites are in power. After a brief period of allowing some political freedom, they embarked on repressive campaigns to eliminate all forms of opposition, subverting democracy and elections almost as meticulously as the Soviets did and eliminating their political opponents through assassination, imprisonment, or exile. With the democratic and nationalist opposition effectively crushed, the survivors have moved underground and become armed and radicalized by Islamic fundamentalism, which seeks to overthrow the ruling elites. It is undeniable that governments have failed to alleviate poverty in these and other areas in which Islamists have

found a welcome. But this does not exonerate governments from the duty to address issues of poverty, yet it should not be assumed that in doing so they will also remove the cause of extremism. Another reason is that the middle or upper middle class origins of many of the leaders of the extremist movements, and on their education in the technical fields.

Hence, from the discussion above, the major claim of this paper that the growth of religious radicalism has been used by the state(s) to legitimise institutionalisation of authoritarianism by reducing checks on the power of the executive(s) thereby leading to centralisation of power and the use of coercive state apparatuses, more often than not, for wrongful acts. This, in fact, can be said to be coming to the aid of the groups directly associated with the menace religious radicalism in Central Asia which undoubtedly has larger implications for all the neighbouring countries including India.

However, in order to be able to assess the implications of religious radicalism, it is necessary to know in some detail about the challenges that have been posed by it in the Central Asian countries.

Different Regional Security Mechanisms

There are different categories of security challenge that affect the Central Asian region, with varying degrees of trans-border implications. The most serious one is the threat posed by religious militant groups with ties across the wider region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secondly, connected to Islamist extremism is violence related to internal political causes that include discontent over living standards, repression, and weak government. Lastly, there is a security threat posed by the proliferation of drug trafficking and competition among drug networks.

The Central Asian governments have taken different approaches to control the rise of radical Islam in their respective countries. In order to address different type of non-traditional threats in Central Asia, there is an urgent need of collective efforts. No single country can control such type of non-traditional threats. In the context of Central Asia, there are different regional security mechanisms viz. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Commonwealth of Independent States, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (CICA) etc.,

India's role in Central Asia

Central Asia's importance for India lies in its geo-strategic location. It shares borders with China, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan and is located in proximity to Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). The breakup of the Soviet Union and the loss of it as a superpower patron created serious security concerns for India. Border realignment, ethnic disputes, resurgent Islam, and civil war would directly affect the territorial integrity of Afghanistan, which, in domino fashion, would influence Pakistan, Iran, and Kashmir. In such an environment drug trafficking, illegal arms, and crime syndicates would flourish, threatening not only Central Asia but all of its neighbours. Such a scenario would inevitably have consequences for India's national security. India is also alarmed at Pakistan's call for Central Asia as a strategic hinterland and its Islamic initiatives such as the ECO. As a consequence, India is seeking new security arrangements with the republics of Central Asia. The new security environment presents both challenges and opportunities for India to influence Central Asian affairs. Pakistan's failure does not mean India's success, nor does Central Asia's distrust of Pakistan's Islamic agenda make it pro-Indian.

The threat of instability caused by the forces of religious radicalism and cross border terrorism has impeded the growth of democratic institutions and civil society in Central Asia. Coercive role of the state and the authoritarian nature of the leadership have grown in the name of countering extremists. The victory of Taliban in almost the whole of Afghanistan opened the doors of new possibilities for the fundamentalists and both India and Central Asia came under increasing pressure. India, realising that Central Asia held the key because of its two major worries viz. Pakistan's expanding influence over Afghanistan and beyond and the threat of a growing belt of fundamentalism sponsoring cross-border terrorism chose to cooperate closely with the secular governments in Central Asia. India condemned the Taliban and it also played a crucial role in the campaign against international recognition to the threat of Taliban (Patnaik 2004: 127). The penetration of extremist forces into Central Asia can have serious security implications for India because of its proximity to PoK and the likely impact of this on the situation in Kashmir. India and Central Asia face common threats and challenges of terrorism, extremism and separatism, drug trafficking and trafficking in the region. The commonality of interest provides greater opportunity to cooperate more closely in addressing the regional security issues of extremism and terrorism. The increasing violence in Pakistan, emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan and the proposed withdrawal of US forces in 2014, all are likely to have serious security implications for both India and Central Asia. India and Central Asia also emphasized the need for enhanced dialogue between their security agencies and regular consultations between their Ministries of Foreign Affairs including coordinated efforts to work within the framework of the joint working group (JWG) on Combating International Terrorism. India can also strengthen its relation with Central Asia through the importance of strengthening Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The Central Asia side reiterated its support for India's full membership in the SCO. India stands ready to play a larger, wider and more active role in the SCO as a full member. Firstly, India, like Russia and other SCO member countries share common interests in the stability of Afghanistan, especially after the withdrawal of the NATO troops by 2014 (Kumar 2013). Secondly, the fight against terrorism is another important area of cooperation between India and the SCO member countries because these countries, like India, are also at risk from terrorist attacks. Finally, membership of the SCO also provide with India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, which aims to increase its political, economic and people-to-people links with the Central Asian nations. India has always had close historical and civilisation ties with the SCO member countries. As a nonaligned state, India rejected military alliances, security agreements, and cultural ties as tools for promoting stability in Central Asia.

Conclusion

Contemporary time has witnessed a major change in the nature of security. This security challenges needs to be emphasized. No single country can prevent the menace of religious extremism in Central Asia. There is urgent need of collective efforts through different security mechanisms to tackle the problem. Though different regional organisations are there in Central Asia but there should be effective implementation of various policies and programmes. Regular meeting and the creation of personal ties may encourage diffusing the crisis. Radicalism in Central Asia is not inevitable but preventable. A number of measures should be taken to control the problem of religious radicalism in Central Asia. First of all, Tajikistan has to accommodate and find a compromise with Islam as one of the main sources of new identity in the region. Religion plays a key role in the daily life of people and it can also be a real threat to the security of secular state. For this purpose, the leaders should work out certain policies towards religious organisations that would not discriminate against them. The continuing

repression of the religious organisations as well as people's rights and freedoms will exacerbate the problem of radical Islam in the region. Simultaneously the state needs to undertake extensive economic reforms to better the standards of living of the people. The international community should encourage the states in the region to democratize and institutionalise and focus on the essentials beneath instability and radicalism, which are repressive and undemocratic regimes, instead of radical groups. The government should expand political participation, encourage freedom of press and speech and establish rule of law. Furthermore, it is important to realise that authoritarian practices are provocative, thus complicate the solution of the problem. Within this framework, one should stress that democracy is not the source of the problem but is, on the contrary, important for the solution. Governments' responses to terrorism at the domestic and international levels are important because the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts depends on the range of counterterrorism policies adopted by the governments of individual states. It is also imperative to search for the causes of excessive and unlawful counterterrorism measures remiss in the area of human rights because the brutality with which governments respond to terrorism is itself an important predictor of future terrorist attacks. Even if terrorist and criminal acts have to be punished, it is important to hold dialogue and negotiation between the authorities and fundamentalist and radical Islamic movements in order to avoid radicalization and instability. Therefore it is legitimate to argue that the real impact of radical Islamist movements in Tajikistan in particular and Central Asia in general has been rather marginal, yet, the policies adopted by regional regimes have been extremely harsh and not proportionate to the threat. Making this fact understand to the leadership of the Central Asian countries is the role and challenge of the liberal democratic countries in the world in general and India, being the largest democracy, in particular.

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