THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA

~ By Akhilesh Pant

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I. Strategic Overview and Contextual Framework

South Asia—encompassing Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—holds nearly one-quarter of the world's population and sits astride some of the most strategically significant sea-lanes and land corridors on Earth. Its geopolitical fault-lines, colonial legacies, religio-ethnic diversity, and nuclear rivalries create a combustible environment where terrorism has taken root, evolved, and internationalized. This chapter traces the historical layers and geopolitical drivers that have shaped terrorism in South Asia from the mid-19th century through 2025.

Key Themes

1. **Colonial Engineering of Identity and Borders**

2. **Cold-War Proxies and Jihadi Infrastructure**

3. **State Use of Non-State Actors as Strategic Tools**

4. **Ideological, Sectarian, and Socio-Economic Catalysts**

5. **The Region as Both Victim and Exporter of Terrorism**

II. Colonial Legacy and Partition (Pre-1947 to Early 1950s)

1. British Colonial Rule: Seeds of Fragmentation

- **Divide-and-Rule Strategy**: The British deliberately cultivated Hindu–Muslim cleavages through separate electorates (1909 Morley-Minto Reforms; 1919 Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms).

- **Militarization of Ethnic Groups**: Recruitment policies favored "martial races" (e.g., Pashtuns, Sikhs, Gurkhas), embedding armed ethnic identities.

- **Infrastructure of Control**: Railways, telegraphs, and cantonments created corridors for rapid troop movement but also laid future insurgent supply lines.

2. Rise of Communal Nationalism

- **All-India Muslim League (1906)** vs. **Indian National Congress (1885)**: Political mobilization along religious lines set a precedent for identity-based militancy.

- **Aligarh Movement & Deobandi Movement**: Ideological roots of future Islamist mobilization.

3. Partition of India (1947)

- **Human Catastrophe**: ~1 million killed; ≈14 million displaced—the largest forced migration of the 20th century.

- **Creation of New Fault-Lines**: Punjab and Bengal were severed; princely states (especially Jammu & Kashmir) became flashpoints.

- **First Indo-Pak War (Oct 1947–Dec 1948)**: Pakistan's use of tribal irregulars set an early template for cross-border terrorism.

III. Cold-War Dynamics and Regional Realignment (1950s–1990s)

1. United States, Pakistan, and the Quest for Strategic Depth

- **SEATO & CENTO Alliances**: Pakistan aligned with the US to counter Soviet influence, receiving military aid that later armed non-state actors.

- **Strategic Depth Doctrine**: Islamabad sought influence in Afghanistan to avoid a two-front threat from India.

2. Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989)

- **US–Pakistan–Saudi Axis**: CIA's Operation Cyclone funneled ≈US$3 billion; Saudi Arabia matched funds; ISI managed distribution.

- **Madrasa Boom**: ~11,000 new madrasas built along the Durand Line, propagating Wahhabi/Salafi ideology.

- **Birth of Transnational Jihad**: Foreign fighters (Afghan Arabs) gained combat experience; future leaders of Al-Qaeda, LeT, and JeM emerged.

3. Ethno-Nationalist Insurgencies

- **Sri Lanka's LTTE (1976–2009)**: Employed suicide bombing as strategic innovation; assassinated Rajiv Gandhi (1991) and President Premadasa (1993).

- **India's Northeast**: ULFA, NSCN, and others capitalized on perceived neglect; external sanctuaries in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

- **Punjab Khalistan Movement (1980s–1990s)**: Diaspora funding, alleged ISI support; Operation Bluestar (1984) a catalytic event.

4. Kashmir Insurgency (1989 Onwards)

- **From Political Agitation to Armed Jihad**: Indigenous JKLF gave way to Pakistan-backed Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, LeT, JeM.

- **Kargil Conflict (1999)**: Demonstrated fusion of state troops with irregulars; nuclear backdrop curtailed conventional escalation.

IV. Post-9/11 Geopolitical Shifts and the War on Terror (2001–Present)

1. US-Led Intervention in Afghanistan (2001)

- **Taliban Ouster & Militant Dispersion**: Fighters and Al-Qaeda cadre relocated to Pakistan's FATA.

- **Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Formation (2007)**: Unified anti-state Pakistani Taliban factions; major attacks include Army GHQ (2009) and APS Peshawar (2014).

2. Pakistan's Double Game

- **Quetta Shura & Haqqani Network**: Sheltered while Pakistan presented itself as a US ally.

- **Grey Listing by FATF (2008, 2012, 2018–2022)**: International pressure but partial compliance.

3. Afghanistan After US Withdrawal (2021)

- **Taliban Resurgence**: Kabul fell 15 Aug 2021; regional jihadist morale boosted.

- **Security Vacuum**: ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) intensified attacks—e.g., Kabul airport bombing (26 Aug 2021).

4. New Arenas of Conflict

- **Digital Jihad**: Encrypted apps (Telegram, WhatsApp, Threema) enable decentralized cells.

- **South Asian ISIS Modules**: Easter Bombings Sri Lanka (2019); pro-ISIS modules busted in Kerala, Maharashtra, and Bangladesh.

V. Regional Rivalries and Proxy Warfare

1. India–Pakistan Contestation

- **Terror as Tool of Statecraft**: ISI's use of LeT, JeM contrasted with India's conventional military doctrine.

- **Episodes of Escalation**:

- o Parliament Attack (13 Dec 2001)

- o Mumbai 26/11 (Nov 2008)

- o Pathankot (Jan 2016)

- o Pulwama (Feb 2019) → Balakot Airstrike (26 Feb 2019)

2. China's Expanding Footprint

- **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**: Baloch insurgents target Chinese personnel (e.g., Karachi Stock Exchange attack 2020).

- **Uighur Militancy Concerns**: Mutual counter-terror commitments underpin Beijing–Islamabad ties.

3. Gulf States and Ideological Exports

- **Petro-Dollar Da'wah**: Funding for Salafi institutions in Kerala, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

- **Foreign Fighters Networks**: Gulf returnees propagate extremist discourse.

VI. Ideological, Religious, and Sectarian Dimensions

1. Wahhabism, Deobandism, and Salafi-Jihadism

- **Doctrinal Tenets**: Emphasis on *takfir* and militant *jihad* reshaped local grievances into global narratives.

- **Key Institutions**: Darul Uloom Deoband (1866), Jamaat-e-Islami (1941), Tablighi Jamaat.

2. Sectarian Terrorism in Pakistan

- **Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)** and **Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)**: Anti-Shia violence; massacres in Quetta and Parachinar.

- **Iran–Saudi Proxy Layer**: Funding and ideological support to competing sects.

3. Buddhist–Muslim Tensions in Sri Lanka and Myanmar Spillover

- **BBS in Sri Lanka**: Anti-Muslim riots (2014, 2018).

- **Rohingya Radicalization**: Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) links with Pakistani and Bangladeshi networks.

4. Hindutva Extremist Currents in India

- **Fringe Groups**: Abhinav Bharat implicated in Malegaon blasts (2008); illustrate multi-religious spectrum of South Asian terrorism.

VII. State Sponsorship, Governance Deficits, and Political Complicity

1. Pakistan's "Deep State"

- **ISI's Directorate S**: Handles covert action; maintains plausible deniability.
- **National Action Plan (2014)**: Attempted crackdown diluted by political cost.

2. Fragile Governance in Conflict Zones

- **Afghan–Pakistan Borderlands (FATA/KP)**: Century-old Pashtun grievances; limited state presence.
- **Balochistan**: Economic marginalization fuels insurgency despite vast mineral wealth.
- **Indian Administered Kashmir**: AFSPA (1990) and human-rights allegations contribute to alienation.

3. Terror Finance Ecosystems

- **Hawala Networks**: Dubai, Karachi, and Dhaka as nodes.
- **Charities as Fronts**: Jamaat-ud-Dawa, FIF, and Al-Rashid Trust.

VIII. Socio-Economic Catalysts and Radicalization Pathways

Catalyst	Mechanism	Illustrative Examples
Youth Unemployment	Militants offer salary, status, and purpose	Kashmir stone-pelters receiving Rs500–800/day; LTTE child soldiers
Education Deficits	Madrasa enrollment substituting public schooling	~2.5 million Pakistani children in madrasas (est. 2020)
Information Echo Chambers	Online propaganda tailors grievances	ISIS-inspired lone wolves in Dhaka café attack (2016)
Refugee Vulnerability	Stateless populations exploited	Afghan refugees in KP camps; Rohingya in Cox's Bazar

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IX. Case Studies

1. 2008 Mumbai Attacks

- **Operational Blueprint**: Maritime infiltration → multi-site assault → global media saturation.

- **Cross-Border Command & Control**: Handlers in Karachi guided assault teams via VOIP.

- **Aftermath**: Indo-Pak composite dialogue suspended; UN proscribed JuD's Hafiz Saeed.

2. Easter Bombings, Sri Lanka (2019)

- **Local Salafi Network + IS Core**: NTJ pledged allegiance to ISIS; coordinated suicide blasts on churches and hotels; 269 killed.

- **Security Lapses**: Prior intel warnings ignored due to political infighting.

3. Pulwama Suicide Attack (2019)

- **JeM Operative Adil Dar**: Ramming of CRPF convoy; 40 personnel killed.

- **Strategic Fallout**: India's first cross-border airstrike since 1971; aerial dogfight ensued.

4. APS Peshawar Massacre (2014)

- **TTP Retaliation**: Targeted military-run school; 149 killed (132 children).

- **Policy Shift**: Sparked Pakistan's Zarb-e-Azb offensive and partial madrasa regulation.

X. Strategic Insights and Future Trajectories

Terrorism in South Asia is inseparable from the region's geostrategic calculus. The use of terrorism as a tool by both state and non-state actors has deeply shaped the political, social, and economic structures of the region. It is not merely a symptom but also a strategy—employed to exploit identity politics, deflect international pressure, and challenge regional adversaries without triggering conventional warfare.

The impact has been devastating: mass casualties, economic paralysis, diplomatic deadlocks, and the radicalization of entire generations. The persistence of terrorism is also a result of ineffective governance, politicization of religion, external patronage, and deep socio-economic inequalities.

Strategic Imperatives Going Forward

1. **Regional Cooperation**: No country in South Asia can combat terrorism in isolation. A shared intelligence grid and joint counter-terrorism task forces are needed.

2. **Ideological De-radicalization**: Combatting the ideological roots—especially Salafi-Jihadi and ultra-nationalist narratives—must go hand-in-hand with military operations.

3. **Economic Empowerment**: Addressing root causes like poverty, unemployment, and educational backwardness is crucial to de-incentivize radicalization.

4. **Global Accountability**: External actors, including China, the US, and Gulf states, must be held responsible for their roles in funding or facilitating extremist networks.

5. **Counter-Narratives**: Cultural diplomacy, Sufi networks, interfaith dialogue, and online counter-propaganda must be developed as tools to contest extremist ideologies.

The future of South Asia will depend not only on how effectively it eliminates existing terror networks, but on how boldly it redefines governance, inclusivity, and cooperation. Only then can the region transform from a crucible of conflict into a beacon of peace.