Editorial

Tightrope walk

The term, BRIC, was coined 25 years ago by the Goldman Sachs economist, Jim O'Neill, to describe Brazil, Russia, India and China as emerging economies that would gain weight in global GDP. It was a research label, not a blueprint for an institution or a common geopolitical strategy. Political leaders of these countries subsequently appropriated the acronym and held the first BRIC summit in 2009, adding South Africa the next year and turning BRIC into BRICS. The group went on to create the New Development Bank in 2015, but beyond that single institution, it has not articulated a mandate that binds members in clear, measurable forms of cooperation. In the last two years, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have joined BRICS which has left the expanded bloc functioning mostly as a loose consultative forum. As the current chair of BRICS, India is scheduled to host a summit in New Delhi next month. For India, BRICS has never been an anti-West project, and it has consistently resisted attempts to cast it as a counter-G7 platform. New Delhi frames BRICS as one plank in its policy of multi-alignment that seeks simultaneous engagement with the United States of America, Europe, Russia, China and the Gulf without accepting bloc commitment. India sees BRICS instrumentally — as a forum for selective cooperation on some issues like development finance while avoiding any binding commitments on geopolitical issues. This approach has become sharper since the US president, Donald Trump, took visible offence at some BRICS narratives such as de-dollarisation, prompting Narendra Modi to walk back from his rhetoric of using domestic currency for trade. In practice, BRICS functions for India as a geopolitical balancing mechanism that allows it to hedge between Western partners and major non-Western actors such as China, Russia and Iran. Within the grouping, India projects itself as a bridge between the West and the rest and uses summit communiqués and working groups to keep channels open with countries that have strained ties with Washington. This posture is presented by Modi as evidence of a doctrine of multi-alignment, but the record shows a narrow transactionalism that rarely converts into substantive outcomes beyond symbolic participation. This approach requires constant swings to ensure that relations with one bloc do not damage partnerships with other partners. The Modi government has struggled to explain how this balancing act yields tangible benefits for India. Even though the strategic outcomes remain consistently underwhelming, foreign policy elites in New Delhi celebrate this ambiguity as a sophisticated diplomatic achievement. A rigorous empirical evaluation demonstrates that refusing to take definitive stands has rendered India irrelevant during critical moments of international crisis. India's long-standing argument is that a multipolar Asia is necessary for a multipolar world. BRICS is seen as a vehicle to advance that claim. It would want other member states to remember that Chinese hegemony cannot replace Western dominance, but China's relative weight within BRICS and Beijing's parallel efforts through the Belt and Road Initiative have made that proposition unpalatable. The economic disparities between India and China since 2014 have sharpened the asymmetry inside BRICS and exposed India's limited ability to shape group outcomes. The Modi government would like to use BRICS to constrain Chinese dominance, but in negotiations it ends up reacting to Chinese and Russian proposals rather than setting the agenda. The term, BRIC, was coined 25 years ago by the Goldman Sachs economist, Jim O'Neill, to describe Brazil, Russia, India and China as emerging economies that would gain weight in global GDP. 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Bangladesh has a terrorism problem it cannot ignore

Bangladesh may not have a terrorism problem on the scale of, say, Pakistan. But it does have a terrorism problem, and pretending otherwise has repeatedly allowed a smaller, evolving threat to be rediscovered only after it has changed form. The latest warning about al-Qaeda in Bangladesh should neither be sensationalised nor dismissed.

Early this month, the United Nations Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reported "some concern" that al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was attempting to exploit Bangladesh to establish cells. The wording was cautious, as intelligence assessments of this kind usually are. It did not claim that al-Qaeda had established some sprawling organisation inside Bangladesh.

AQIS is increasingly understood to operate through small, dispersed logistical, financial, and operational networks rather than the conspicuous structures associated with an earlier generation of jihadist organisations. Yet Bangladesh's Home Minister, Salahuddin Ahmed, responded by saying that the government was not taking the report into account, describing what he understood of it as assumption-based.

The response matters because Bangladesh has been here before. Again and again, periods of declining terrorist violence have been interpreted not simply as counterterrorism success but as evidence that the underlying problem has disappeared. This has happened under governments of different political colours. It happened under Sheikh Hasina, whose government often insisted that Islamic State had no organisational presence in Bangladesh even while Bangladeshi terrorists were adopting its ideology and carrying out attacks in its name.

It also happened much earlier under Khaleda Zia. In March 2005, Zia told parliament that Islamist terrorism and religious extremism did not exist in Bangladesh, dismissing reports about Taliban and al-Qaeda elements as opposition propaganda. Five months later, Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, JMB, exploded hundreds of bombs across 63 of the country's 64 districts in one of the most extraordinary demonstrations of terrorist organisational reach South Asia had witnessed.

The lesson is not that every government has deliberately concealed terrorism. It is that Bangladesh has developed a recurring political instinct to equate acknowledging extremism with damaging the country's reputation, conceding ground to political opponents, or validating foreign criticism. Under Khaleda Zia, senior ministers spent years questioning whether organised terrorists existed at all. But thanks to leaked US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, we know some of these ministers were accusing Zia and her son, the current Prime Minister, of patronising the terrorists to attack their opponents.

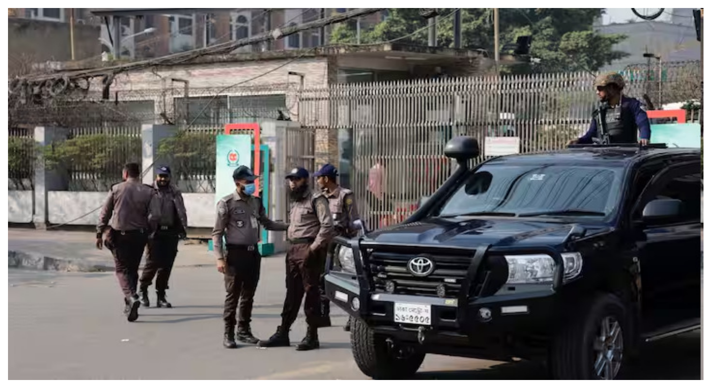
As Bangla Bhai and his followers operated openly in parts of northern Bangladesh, officials and coalition figures accused newspapers and the public of inventing the phenomenon. Only after the violence became impossible to deny did the government move decisively against JMB and related organisations. Contemporary reporting noted that intelligence officials had repeatedly warned policymakers about terrorist activity before the nationwide bombing campaign.

This matters because terrorism in Bangladesh has never behaved like a permanent organisation with a headquarters, membership card, and easily identifiable chain of command. The country's jihadist networks have repeatedly fragmented under pressure, changed names, transferred personnel, adopted new international brands, and resurfaced in different forms. The important question, then, is not whether a particular organisation maintains a visible office somewhere in Dhaka. It is whether networks, ideologies, personal relationships, financing, recruitment, and operational experience survive periods of suppression. Bangladesh's history strongly suggests that they do.

That history begins long before Islamic State and long before the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery massacre. The roots of modern Bangladeshi jihadism reach into the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Thousands of Bangladeshis were reported to have travelled to participate in the Afghan jihad, although precise figures remain disputed. The exact number matters less than what some veterans brought home: battlefield experience, ideological conviction, and relationships formed among Pakistani, Afghan, Arab, and other foreign terrorists. Afghanistan created an international fraternity of jihad in which local struggles could be understood as components of a much larger religious and political project. It is believed that Pakistan's ISI, in league with elements of Bangladeshi intelligence, used these networks in Bangladesh and Myanmar throughout the 1990s. Dirty work indeed.

Veterans of these conflicts subsequently helped establish Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh, HuJI-B, which emerged publicly in the early 1990s. Bangladesh was therefore connected to the jihadist currents developing around Afghanistan and Pakistan well before the attacks of September 11 transformed terrorism into a central issue of international politics. Fazlul Rahman, associated with Bangladesh's jihadist movement, was among the signatories to Osama bin Laden's 1998 declaration calling for attacks against the United States and its allies. Bangladeshi terrorists were also documented training in Afghanistan and interacting with organisations associated with al-Qaeda. The proposition that Bangladeshi terrorism has developed entirely in isolation from transnational jihadism is simply incompatible with the historical record. Rohingya terrorist organisations were funnelled through Bangladesh to Pakistan, then eventually to al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. A Bangladeshi terrorist once got a job with British Airways to plot mass-casualty terrorist attacks in the UK.

Yet these international connections did not prevent terrorism from becoming deeply home-grown. JMB emerged in the late 1990s and developed an extensive domestic infrastructure. Its capabilities became impossible to deny on 17 August 2005, when hundreds of bombs exploded within a short period across almost the entire country. The relatively low death toll obscured the organisational significance of the operation. A clandestine movement had recruited enough personnel and built the logistical and communications networks needed to stage attacks simultaneously from one end of Bangladesh to the other. That episode should have permanently ended the assumption that the absence of spectacular violence means the absence of organised extremism. Terrorist groups can spend years recruiting, fundraising, preaching, developing safe houses, and preparing cadres without attracting sustained national attention. Periods of silence may mean that a network has been successfully disrupted. They can also mean that it has fragmented, gone



underground, or entered another phase of development.

A decade later, the ecosystem transformed again. Al-Qaeda announced AQIS in 2014 as part of its effort to consolidate jihadist networks across South Asia. At almost the same time, Islamic State was expanding across Syria and Iraq and presenting itself as the new centre of global jihad. Bangladesh became one of the countries in which both movements found local sympathisers and operatives. The 2014 Burdwan blast in India showed how the networks operate across multiple countries and nationalities. Ansarullah Bangla Team, subsequently known as Ansar al-Islam, became closely associated with AQIS. It targeted secular writers, bloggers, publishers, and activists, while al-Qaeda propaganda celebrated attacks against figures it accused of insulting Islam in Bangladesh. Islamic State appealed to a different constellation of Bangladeshi terrorists and sympathisers. Bangladeshis travelled abroad to join the organisation, while local networks adopted its propaganda, ideology, and methods.

The most infamous manifestation came with the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016, when terrorists murdered 22 people in Dhaka. Islamic State claimed responsibility, while Bangladeshi authorities emphasised that the attackers belonged to a domestic Neo-JMB network rather than a foreign-controlled Islamic State branch. Operationally, the distinction mattered. Politically, however, it became too easy to use that distinction to minimise the wider significance of transnational affiliation. A terrorist organisation does not need direct command-and-control from Raqqa or Kabul for its influence to be real. Bangladeshi terrorists can belong to indigenous networks while simultaneously embracing the ideology, propaganda, objectives, and identity of an international jihadist movement. This is why AQIS's current evolution matters. Modern al-Qaeda affiliates do not necessarily require large training camps or conspicuous territorial structures. Decentralised organisations survive through facilitators, recruiters, financiers, propagandists, encrypted communications, informal relationships, and relatively small cells. They can be weaker than their predecessors while also being harder to identify. Evolution does not always mean expansion. Sometimes it means becoming smaller, more dispersed, and more resilient. Bangladesh's counterterrorism campaign after Holey Artisan significantly weakened terrorist organisations. Security agencies disrupted plots, captured or killed important operatives, dismantled cells, and reduced the ability of jihadists to stage spectacular attacks. Those achievements deserve recognition. But successful counterterrorism should never be confused with permanent eradication. Suppression frequently produces fragmentation, and fragmented movements can later adapt to changing political and technological conditions. An unavoidable political complication also exists. Under Sheikh Hasina, counterterrorism became entangled with allegations of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, politicised prosecutions, and wider authoritarianism. Those abuses damaged public confidence in security institutions. But recognising them does not require adopting the reverse proposition that the terrorist threat itself was invented. Khaleda Zia's experience demonstrates why. Her government initially downplayed terrorism and then, once JMB's capabilities became undeniable, mounted a much more serious campaign against it. The threat did not become real on 21 August 2004. What changed was its visibility. Terrorists were trying to assassinate her political rivals in high-profile attacks. She tried to cover it up. Bangladesh therefore needs a more mature way of discussing terrorism. It does not face the same threat environment as Britain, which has dealt with decades of domestic and international terrorism, sophisticated lone-actor radicalisation, repeated jihadist plots, and a large permanent counterterrorism architecture. Comparing the two directly would exaggerate Bangladesh's situation. But the opposite conclusion is equally mistaken.