

Terrorism and COVID-19: An assessment of BRICS Counter-Terror Strategy

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Abstract—Global conflicts have continued despite a raging pandemic, proving that they are an unrelenting feature of international politics. As per UNSC- Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) Report 2021, 44 per cent of their member countries believed that COVID-19 had increased the threat of terrorism in their respective regions and 69 per cent stated that countering terrorism has become more challenging as a result of the pandemic. In this context, the BRICS Counter-terrorism Action Plan has been at the forefront of global reforms designed to curb this growing threat. The Action Plan follows the adoption by the BRICS leaders in 2020 of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Against this backdrop, the paper aims to understand the BRICS outlook toward terrorism. To accomplish this, the paper compares the BRICS summit declarations from 2009 to 2022 to understand how BRICS views on terrorism have evolved. Moreover, it also examines the issues and challenges that hinder efforts to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. The author delves into both quantitative and qualitative data to establish correct references.

Index Terms—India, Nuclear Strategy, Minimum Deterrence, Defensive Realism, Proliferation.

I. INTRODUCTION:

After more than two years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (11th March 2020), it continues to pose a threat that varies in scale, scope, and intensity among nation-states. One of the most formidable challenges that have emerged in the wake of this outbreak is Terrorism. According to data compiled by the US state department Report 2020, there were 10,172 terror attacks across 98 countries in 2020, 1,300 more than the incidents reported in 2019 [1]. The report further highlighted that even though India was in the top 10 countries for most terrorism incidents in 2020, it was not in the top 10 for fatalities. Afghanistan reported 1,722 terror attacks, followed by Syria (1,322) and DR Congo (999). The Taliban (including the Haqqani Network) were responsible for the most terror incidents (1,325) and fatalities (7,417) in 2020, followed by ISIS-Core (which comprises the ISIS elements in Iraq and Syria), al-Shabaab, CPI-Maoists and ISIS-DR Congo, the US analysis shows [2].

A pivotal question at this juncture is – Whether we have a clear, consistent, and universal definition of what terrorism is and how it's different from any other form of violence (such as state-based armed conflict, non-state conflict, hate crime and so on). The answer to this question is not straightforward, as there is no internationally recognised legal definition of terrorism. As per Oxford Dictionary, Terrorism is “the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims” [3]. But even this definition is unspecific and subjective. Within the framework of BRICS, despite its member states' divergent foreign and security policy priorities, Terrorism is acknowledged as a severe threat at the regional, national, and international levels. BRICS assessment of terrorism “goes beyond the traditional and non-traditional security divide and acknowledges the military and non-military dimensions of terrorism. With this cross-dimensional view, the group advocated for a comprehensive approach to terrorism in all forms, including violent extremism, radicalisation, terror financing and recruitment, illicit drug trafficking and financial flows” [4].

Against this background, the paper is structured into three main sections. The first section illustrates how terror activities spread across BRICS countries during the Covid pandemic. The second section attempts to understand BRICS's outlook toward terrorism. To do so, the author will compare the BRICS Summit declarations (2009 to 2022) and try to understand if it has evolved its views on terrorism from the first summit held in Russia in 2009 to the latest one held in Beijing in 2022. It further analyses the BRICS Counter-Terror Strategy. Finally, the third section concludes the study. But before I begin, two caveats are in order: First, the paper does not provide an in-depth analysis of all forms of terror activities in BRICS countries. The instances are offered solely to establish the framework for the article. Second, the study focuses primarily on the evolution of the BRICS Counter-Terror Strategy.

II. COVID-19 AND TERRORISM:

Terrorism poses one of the greatest threats to International Peace and Security. This remained true during the COVID-19 pandemic when parts of the world had to shut down, while it merely forced terrorists to change how they operated (UN Office of Counter Terrorism Report 2021). Terrorist groups have sought “to exploit pandemic-related socio-economic grievances and political tensions — often exacerbated by related restrictions, which have undermined human rights — to expand their influence, drive their recruitment efforts, and undermine State authority” [5]. They view the pandemic as an opportunity to spread disinformation and theories designed to undermine the confidence in the government. By increasing their propaganda, terrorists hope to influence anxious citizens to shut inside their homes by lockdowns and compel them to spend more time on social media and the internet.

However, whether terrorists have successfully attracted new converts to their cause or active recruits during the current crisis is still uncertain [6]. Yet, we must recognise and address how the fear, anxiety, and isolation associated with COVID-19 can serve as fertile recruiting grounds for violent extremist groups motivated by racial or ethnic prejudices.

Despite their different origins, COVID-19 and terrorism share specific characteristics. First, both have the same *modus operandi*: they are invisible; they pose both an endogenous and exogenous threat and choose their victims indiscriminately. Second, governments worldwide use the metaphor of 'war' to deal with this infectious disease (Bourekba 2020). The Chinese premier Xi Jinping swore to wage a 'People's War' on the coronavirus. Donald Trump, the US President, described himself as a 'Wartime President' of a country fighting against a common enemy. Likewise, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while talking about the 21-day national lockdown, invoked the imagery of an 18-day battle from the Hindu epic Mahabharata, saying that India aims to win the 'war' against the coronavirus in 21 days [7]. Third, as with terrorism, governments cannot combat a pandemic of this nature without the support of the public. It is necessary to encourage people to make sacrifices, such as locking themselves in their houses for weeks and surrendering their civil liberties. Fourth, both phenomena pose a threat that does not have an expiration date, as there is always the possibility of a new outbreak or, in the case of terrorism, a new wave of attacks.

Therefore, to sum up, "Pandemic-related terrorism trends have overlapped across regions. Social restrictions, including the closure of civic spaces, have made it hard for civil society organisations (CSOs) and other non-State actors engaged in countering violent extremism (CVE) to conduct programmatic interventions (including gender-related interventions) in communities vulnerable to radicalisation to violence. Economic downturns have exacerbated existing grievances, increased humanitarian needs, and undermined public trust in Government" [8]. The following section illustrates the growth of terrorist activities in different BRICS countries during Covid times.

III. INDIA:

According to data compiled by the US state department Report 2020, India faced more terror attacks in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020) than the previous year (2019), with 37 per cent of these incidents reported from Jammu and Kashmir [9]. The data further revealed that the states in India that experienced the most terror incidents were Jammu and Kashmir, with 257 incidents (37.8 per cent), Chhattisgarh with 145 incidents (21.4 per cent), and Jharkhand with 69 incidents (10.2 per cent). Among the perpetrators in India, according to the US data, CPI-Maoist continued to be the fourth most destructive group in the world in 2020, with 298 incidents and 202 fatalities. They were behind 44 per cent of the total (679) terror attacks in the country, while Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Hizbul Mujahideen were responsible for 6 per cent of all incidents [10].

The state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was a popular infiltration point for militant groups during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially those affiliated with Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). According to the intelligence inputs available to national security planners, around 160 terrorists of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) were ready to infiltrate the Valley [11]. According to investigators, the April 5, 2020, encounter in the Keran sector (a village in the Kupwara district) of Jammu and Kashmir, in which five terrorists were killed in a close-quarters battle, revealed that the LeT had big plans to infiltrate from the Kupwara sector. Five elite Indian commandos also died in operation. Another state to bear the brunt of terrorist activities in the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic was Chhattisgarh. An infamous incident in this regard was the 2021 Sukma-Bijapur attack. This ambush was carried out by Naxalite-Maoist insurgents from the Communist Party of India (Maoist) against Indian security forces on 3 April 2021 at the Sukma-Bijapur border near Jonaguda village in Sukma district of Chhattisgarh, leading to the killing of 22 security personnel and 9 Naxalites [12]. The death toll was the worst for Indian security forces fighting the Naxalites since 2017.

IV. RUSSIA:

The Russian Federation also prioritised counter-terrorism efforts during Covid-19 outbreak (2020). Still, it was a target of domestic and international terrorist groups, particularly those associated with longstanding separatist groups in the North Caucasus. During the year, militants targeted government buildings and law enforcement officers. While the vast majority of these attacks were prevented, two incidents are worth mentioning. First, "on December 11, a suicide bomber detonated himself while law enforcement officers attempted to detain him in the village of Ucheken, Karachay-Cherkessia Republic, in the North Caucasus region. The detonation injured six officers, none seriously. The incident occurred outside the regional Federal Security Service (FSB) headquarters. Second, on December 28, two assailants armed with knives killed one policeman and wounded another in Grozny, Chechnya. Police officers killed both assailants while trying to apprehend them [13].

Andrei Novikov, head of the Russia-led Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) Anti-Terrorism Centre on June 2020, pointed out, "While governments are trying to ensure health security, focusing on protecting the lives and health of their people, recruiters of international terrorist groups are not just taking advantage of the difficult situation to recruit more 'Jihad soldiers,' they are calling on infected members to spread COVID-19 as wide as possible in public places, state agencies and so on" [14]. But on a positive note, while highlighting terrorist tactics, Deputy Secretary of Russia's Security Council Yuri Kokov pointed out, "deliberate hit-and-run attacks on members of the public have become less common among terrorists. He attributed this to security measures in public places, including COVID-related restrictions" [15].

V. CHINA:

As per Country Reports on Terrorism 2020 by the US Department of State, PRC officials maintain that no violent terrorist incidents have occurred since 2016. Chinese citizens abroad were affected by terrorist attacks not directed explicitly against PRC policies [16]. For instance, on February 6, Islamic State sympathisers in the Maldives stabbed three persons, including two Chinese citizens.

VI. BRAZIL:

The United States and Brazil maintained strong counterterrorism cooperation in 2020, building on previous collaborative efforts. There were no reported terrorist incidents in Brazil in 2020 [17].

VII. SOUTH AFRICA:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no terrorism-related incidents were reported in South Africa during 2020. This downward trend has been observed since 2019, following an unusually high number of incidents in 2018 [18].

VIII. BRICS:

The origin of the BRICS is intimately associated with multilateralism. Indeed, “the most important unifying objective of the BRICS as a political grouping has been reforming post-war Bretton Woods financial multilateral institutions; namely, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank” [19]. The term BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) was first coined in 2001 by the Goldman Sachs economist Jim O’Neill in his report, ‘Building Better Global Economic BRICs’, referring to Brazil, Russia, India, and China - four of the fastest-growing emerging economies at the time. As a forum, BRIC was formalised with the Foreign Ministers’ meeting of the four countries during the UN General Assembly in September 2006 in New York. The First BRIC Summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009. Later, during the third BRIC summit in April 2011, South Africa joined this forum, and ‘BRICS’ was formed. The establishment of BRICS was rooted “in the long-term common economic interests of the member countries, which include reforming the global financial and economic architecture, strengthening the principles and standards of international law and supporting the complementarities in many sectors of their economies” [20].

IX. BRICS SUMMITS:

Over the past decades, fourteen summit meetings have taken place, attended by leaders of the respective BRICS countries. The first summit took place in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009 and the fourteenth summit on 23 June 2022 in Beijing, China, through video conferencing. The BRICS agenda during these summits has covered issues related to intra-BRICS cooperation and global governance issues. The following are some areas of great contemporary relevance to BRICS countries. First, Reforms of multilateral institutions, issues of global governance, and methods of improving its efficiency and representativeness. Second, International Security explores traditional and non-traditional threats to peace and security. Third, an integrated approach to digitalisation focuses on digital public goods, governance, and sustainable development. Fourth, to explore how climate change impacts the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. On the issue of terrorism within the BRICS Declarations, the author has attempted to understand the evolution of BRICS comprehensive views on terrorism in the next section [21].

- In the First Summit (Yekaterinburg, Russia, 2009), the declaration stated, “We strongly condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reiterate that there can be no justification for any act of terrorism anywhere or for whatever reasons.”
- The Second Summit (Brasilia, Brazil, 2010) stated, “We condemn terrorist acts in all forms and manifestations.”
- With the inclusion of South Africa in the BRICs fold, the Third Summit (Sanya, China, 2011) strengthened the geographical representation. The member states reiterated their stand and stated, “We reiterate our strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and stress that there can be no justification, whatsoever, for any acts of terrorism.”
- In the Fourth Summit (New Delhi, India, 2012), the countries of BRICS stated, “We reiterate that there can be no justification, whatsoever, for any act of terrorism in any form or manifestation”.
- The Fifth Summit (Durban, South Africa, 2013) stated, “We reiterate our strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and stress that there can be no justification, whatsoever, for any acts of terrorism”.
- At the Sixth Summit (Fortaleza, Brazil, 2014), the member States declared, “We reiterate our condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, wherever it occurs.”
- At the 2015 Summit (Ufa, Russia), the declaration on Comprehensive view on Terrorism, reiterated the member States’ stand on terrorism, further stated that the acts of terror could not be justified in any form. They said, “We reiterate our strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and stress that there can be no justification, whatsoever, for any acts of terrorism, whether based upon ideological, religious, political, racial, ethnic or any other justification”.

- The 2016 declaration (Goa, India) has continued with the stand of the BRICS that condemns terrorism in all forms. Moreover, the BRICS Working Group on Counterterrorism held its first meeting in September 2016 under India's Chair-ship. It "discussed international and regional counter-terrorism issues and BRICS Counter-Terrorism cooperation to strengthen intelligence and information sharing, facilitate research and development on measures to combat terrorism and promote capacity building, including training, experience sharing, and technical cooperation in Counter-Terrorism efforts" [22].
- The 2017 BRICS declaration (Xiamen, China) bracketed Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed with global terror groups Islamic State and al-Qaeda, marking a significant diplomatic win in India's efforts to counter cross-border terrorism. The BRICS leaders declared that those "committing, organising or supporting" terror acts must be held accountable (The Hindustan Times 2017).
- The 2018 BRICS Summit (Johannesburg Declaration) called upon "the international community to establish a genuinely broad international counter-terrorism coalition and support the UN's central coordinating role in this regard. The countries called for expeditious finalisation and adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) by the United Nations General Assembly. To further address the threat of chemical and biological terrorism, BRICS leaders supported and emphasised the need for launching multilateral negotiations on an international convention for the suppression of acts of chemical and biological terrorism, including at the Conference on Disarmament" [23].
- At the 2019 BRICS Summit in Brasilia, Brazil, the member countries urged for "concerted efforts to fight against terrorism under UN auspices by international law, recognised the primary role of States and their competent authorities in preventing and countering terrorism and expressed conviction that a comprehensive approach is necessary to ensure effective results in combating terrorism" (Brasilia Declaration 2019). In November 2019, "the BRICS Working Group on Counter-Terrorism decided to constitute five sub-working groups in the following areas: terrorist financing, use of the Internet for terrorist purposes, countering radicalisation, issue of foreign terrorist fighters and capacity-building".
- At the 2020 BRICS Summit (Saint Petersburg, Russia), held virtually, the leaders "adopted the BRICS Counter-Terrorism Strategy aimed at complementing and strengthening cooperation among the BRICS countries as well as making a meaningful contribution to the global efforts to prevent and combat the threat of terrorism" [24]. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi proposed this strategy at the Xiamen Summit in 2017 to give impetus to counter-terrorism cooperation between BRICS countries.
- At the 2021 BRICS Summit (held virtually) under the theme 'BRICS @ 15: Intra-BRICS Cooperation for Continuity, Consolidation and Consensus' on 9 September 2021 under the Chair-ship of the Republic of India, the member countries adopted the 'New Delhi Declaration and called for a peaceful resolution of Afghanistan situation. The BRICS said, "We follow with concern the latest developments in Afghanistan. We call for refraining from violence and settling the situation by peaceful means. We stress the need to contribute to fostering an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue to ensure stability, civil peace, and law and order in the country. In the strongest terms, we condemn the terrorist attacks near the Hamid Karzai Kabul International Airport that resulted in many deaths and injuries. We underscore the priority of fighting terrorism, including preventing attempts by terrorist organisations to use Afghan territory as a terrorist sanctuary and to carry out attacks against other countries, as well as drug trade within Afghanistan".

X. BRICS COUNTER TERROR STRATEGY:

The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) adopted the "BRICS Counter Terror Strategy" at the bloc's 12th Annual Summit in November 2020. Russian President Vladimir Putin chaired the virtual BRICS Summit. The summit's theme was "BRICS Partnership for Global Stability, Shared Security and Innovative Growth". Since the meeting was held against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the joint statement of all countries recognised the role of "extensive immunisation". In his address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to terrorism as the world's greatest threat. He further emphasised that those who support and assist terrorists should also be held accountable, and the problem must be addressed in a united manner. PM Modi hailed The BRICS Counter-Terrorism Strategy as a panacea for curing the growing menace of global terrorism.

The original policy document of the BRICS Counter Terror Strategy consists of three main sections – Preamble, Principles and Goals. The BRICS High Representatives for Security shall be entrusted with leading the review of this strategy's implementation. The BRICS Counterterrorism Working Group (CTWG) shall be entrusted with its implementation.

XII. PREAMBLE:

As per the Preamble of the BRICS Counter Terror Strategy, this strategy aims to complement and strengthen the existing bilateral and multilateral ties among the BRICS countries and to make a meaningful contribution to global efforts to prevent and combat terrorism. "The BRICS countries reaffirm that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security and that any act of terrorism, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever motives and purposes, is a crime and has no justification. The BRICS countries also recognise that acts, methods and practices of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations are activities aimed at the destruction of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy, threatening the territorial integrity and security of States and that the international community should take the

necessary steps to enhance cooperation to prevent and combat terrorism, including the cross-border movement of terrorists. They are convinced that terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, civilisation or ethnic group” [25].

XIII. PRINCIPLES:

The BRICS countries' counter-terrorism cooperation is based on the following principles [26]:

- Full respect for the sovereignty of the participating countries and non-interference in their internal affairs.
- Commitment to the principles of international law and recognition of the central and coordinating role of the United Nations on the issues of peace and security.
- Recognition of the role of regional organisations in countering the threat of terrorism.
- Need for all States to refrain from organising, instigating, facilitating, participating in, financing, encouraging or tolerating terrorist activities and to take appropriate practical measures to ensure that their territories are not used for terrorist bases or preparation, or organisation of terrorist acts intended to be committed against other States or their citizens.
- Due consideration of national interests and priorities.
- Openness, information sharing, and consensus-based decision-making.
- Recognition of the decisive role of States and their competent authorities in combating terrorism and extremism conducive to terrorism with due account for national experience and countries' specificities.
- Inadmissibility of using terrorist groups or issues about countering international terrorism and extremism conducive to terrorism for political ends.
- Adoption of a comprehensive approach to combating terrorism.
- Rejection of double standards on countering terrorism and extremism conducive to terrorism.
- Addressing the conditions conducive to spreading terrorism and attaching full importance to countering the extremism conducive to terrorism.

XIV. GOALS:

The BRICS countries will –

- Strengthen their unity in countering international terrorism and its financing.
- Consider undertaking concerted measures against those involved in organising, instigating, facilitating, participating in, financing, encouraging or tolerating terrorist activities.
- Call upon all nations to take appropriate measures to prevent the use of their territories for terrorist bases or the perpetration or organisation of terrorist acts intended to be committed against other States or their citizens.
- Counter the global threat of terrorism based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, relevant UN Security Council resolutions and international counter-terrorism conventions and protocols, where applicable.
- comprehensive implementation of the UN Global Counter- 4 Terrorism Strategy in a balanced way and implementation of the provisions of the relevant international counter-terrorism conventions and protocols.
- Suppress the facilitation of terrorist groups, entities and associated persons by not making available to them any resources, such as human, financial, or material, including weaponry.
- Utilise the BRICS Counterterrorism Working Group to strengthen intelligence and information sharing and cooperation on terrorist organisations listed by the UN Security Council.
- Pursue the adoption of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism collectively.
- Facilitate research and development on measures to counterterrorism.
- Enhance cooperation in the sphere of mutual legal assistance and extradition, in conformity with their domestic laws and regulations, to afford the broadest measure of service in connection with investigation or criminal proceedings against terrorists.
- Strengthen cooperation against the misuse of information and telecommunication technology for terrorist and other criminal purposes; create counter-narratives disrupting the propaganda of terrorist and extremist ideas conducive to terrorism.
- Broaden their counter-terrorism cooperation with the United Nations, as well as the G-20 and the FATF.

- Strengthen de-radicalization cooperation to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism through education, skills development and employment facilitation while recognising that none of the requirements can excuse or justify acts of terrorism.
- Cooperate to address the threat of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.
- Promote capacity building, including training, experience sharing, and technical cooperation in counterterrorism efforts.
- Promote public awareness and participation in counter-terrorism efforts and enhance inter-faith and intra-faith dialogue.

XV. CONCLUSION:

It is essential to understand that the war against terrorism is a localised conflict that requires the unflinching support of society and can be lost quickly if the morale and resolve of the community to combat terrorism weaken. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the developments in Afghanistan have altered the meaning and the way we look at terrorism globally. In this context, the BRICS Counter Terror Strategy, with an overarching mission of reducing the vulnerability of people worldwide to terrorism by preventing, combating, and prosecuting terrorist acts and countering incitement and recruitment to terrorism, can act as a milestone in dealing with the issue. These efforts will prevent the further geographical expansion of terrorism and address the risks posed by terrorists returning from conflict zones to their countries of origin or travelling to third countries.

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