Speech on
‘Non-Traditional Security Threats to Bangladesh’

By

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Aas-Salaamu-A’laikum and Good Morning

Introductory Comments

First of all, let me congratulate the Directing Staff of NSI for realizing the importance of engaging young intelligence officers on the critical non-traditional security threats in Bangladesh. It would be pertinent to say that in contemporary times, the various elements of non-traditional security on their own, or as a
combination of threats, portend the greatest security risks to individuals, countries and regions around the world. In our deliberation today, I would first like to deal with the concept of security according to its traditional and non-traditional definitions. This would be followed by a detailed examination of the various non-traditional security threats affecting Bangladesh.

**Security: Traditional and Nontraditional**

The traditional definition of national security during the Cold War was ‘the protection of the state and its vital interests from attack by other states’. Following the end of the Cold War, the understanding of national security shifted to ‘the threats to individual citizens and to our way of life, as well as to the integrity and interests of the state’. This change in the concept of national security emphasizes the fact that, following the end of the Cold War, the security environment has passed from a bipolar system to a multi-polar one, where the threats are more and more complex. In January 1992, the first ever Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Security Council issued a statement that the traditional view of national security was no longer applicable in the late twentieth century, and now extended to various other issues, including humanitarian needs and the environment. Non-traditional security (NTS) threats can thus be defined as challenges to the survival and well-being of peoples and states that arise from non-military sources, such as climate change, resource scarcity, infectious diseases, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, human trafficking, drug trafficking and transnational crime.
These dangers are often transnational in scope, defying unilateral remedies and requiring comprehensive political, economic and social responses, as well as the humanitarian use of military force. Today, non-traditional problems are often at the top of the security agenda of many states that feel more threatened by such challenges than by traditional concerns about interstate war. Increasingly, states define threats to their security in economic, environmental, and demographic terms. In his 1992 Agenda for Peace, then-United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated that “Drought and disease can decimate no less mercilessly than the weapons of war."

The most critical non-traditional security threats facing the world today include:

1) Environmental challenges: These range from pollution and disputes over water to energy and food scarcity, natural hazards and climate change.

2) Demographic problems that include population growth, migration, refugees and health issues,

3) The international drug trade, global organized crime, terrorism, smuggling, and piracy.

**Non-Traditional Security Risks in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to non-traditional security threats that include food and water security, environmental security, health security, illegal migration and human trafficking and transnational crime and transnational terrorism, among others. These threats vary in severity and the level of exposure
by groups or individuals depend on their geographic location as well other issues such as the level of income and access to aid. In today’s speech I would like to highlight the non-traditional security risks that dominate the current security thinking in Bangladesh. These are: Environmental Security, Food Security, Water Security, Energy Security, Economic Security, Climate Change and Terrorism.

**Environmental Security**

Today, environmental security is treated as a component of national security. Environmental security strives to protect humankind from both the short and long-term ravages of nature, man-made threats in nature, as well as the deterioration of the natural environment. Bangladesh ranks as one of the most disaster-prone and environmentally vulnerable countries of the world. Environmental disasters like tropical cyclones, storm surges, floods, tornadoes and droughts ravage the country almost every year, even several times a year.

On average, over the last 50 years at least one cyclonic storm or a storm with hurricane intensity has hit the coast of the Bay of Bengal every 1.5 years. Between 1980 and 2008, Bangladesh experienced 219 natural disasters, causing over US$16 billion in total damage. According to the Asia Pacific Disaster Report 2010, Bangladesh is the most vulnerable country in the Asia Pacific Region in terms of exposure to floods, fifth in terms of storms and eighth in terms of earthquakes.

In the post-1990 period, the nation has been establishing cyclone shelters on the coast and early warning systems have been put in place making use of radio and TV networks and local volunteers. These have kept the loss of lives
within a tolerable limit, however, the damage to properties, businesses and crops have increased in recent times. Most recently, rare back-to-back cyclones hit the coastal belt in 2007 and 2009 causing great loss to life and property.

**Food Security**

The World Food Programme defines Food Security “as the condition where all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Food security in Bangladesh is characterized by considerable regional variations. Factors such as frequent natural disasters, distribution and quality of agricultural land, access to education and health facilities, level of infrastructure development, employment opportunities, and dietary and caring practices all play a role in the determining the state of food security in Bangladesh. One of the most prominent causes of food insecurity is poverty. In Bangladesh, a little more than 30 percent people live below the poverty line, resulting in numerous households that lack the means to acquire sufficient and nutritious food and are therefore food insecure. The poorest upazilas are in the northwest, the coastal belt, Mymensingh, Netrakona, Bandarban and Rangamati. Districts with more than one million people living in extreme poverty include Sirajganj, Naogaon, Bogra, Mymensingh and Chittagong. In these areas food insecurity is one of the greatest threats to the basic survival of people.
Water Security

Although Bangladesh receives considerable freshwater, over 95% of all flows are concentrated in just three rivers - the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. Most of the water flows within just 5 months of the year, with limited infrastructure and space to store the water for the long dry season. These mighty rivers also carry heavy silt loads which clog distributaries and reduce fresh water availability during the dry-season. Both surface and groundwater water availability are further reduced through declining water quality in many areas. In the coastal belt, low flows of rivers and storm surges are resulting in increased saline intrusion, whilst urbanized areas are increasingly contaminated by domestic and industrial waste. Arsenic contamination of ground water has been stated as one of the most severe water security threats in the country. Combined, these natural and man-made issues create considerable water security threats, which will only be exacerbated by climate change.

Bangladesh is a downstream country of several major trans-boundary rivers in South Asia and unilateral activities of upper riparian countries on common rivers often have an adverse impact on the water resources lives, livelihood, economy and ecosystems of our country.

Energy Security

There is now growing understanding in Bangladesh that none of its MDGs can be met without major improvement in the quality and quantity of energy
services. While Bangladesh has posted robust economic growth averaging over 6 percent over the past several years, poor infrastructure – especially unreliable power supply – remains a significant constraint on growth. Studies show that poor quality supply costs the country as much as 2 percent in GDP growth each year. Manufacturers, surveyed in a World Bank’s Investment Climate Assessment, estimate that power shortages cost them around 12 percent in lost sales on an annual basis. While there has been some improvement in generation capacity in the recent past, the demand far outstrips the supply. The country can currently generate about 4500 megawatts (MW), while peak demand can be as high as 6000 MW. With only 49% of Bangladeshis having access to electricity, the per capita energy use is only 180 Kilowatt-hours (kwh), which is one of the lowest in the region. Bangladesh is now in the midst of a serious power crisis. Power generation has failed to keep pace with demand, and, in the last two years, increasing shortages of natural gas, the primary fuel used in power generation, have added to the sector’s problems. Rising demand of petroleum products will accentuate the country’s vulnerability to supply disruptions and price shocks. High and volatile oil prices are especially damaging through their link to loss of real income and the adverse impact of budget deficits, balance of payments, gross domestic product and per capita incomes.

**Economic Security**

Threats to economic security in the context of Bangladesh emanate from both internal and external sources. The internal insecurity comes mainly from
massive poverty and the external ones emanate mainly from the process of globalization, more specifically, from the effects of the Global Financial Crisis.

Bangladesh has managed to reduce poverty consistently over the past decade despite the series of external shocks that have affected the country. According to the World Bank, poverty has fallen from 49 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2005. In 2010, a little more than 30 percent of the population of the country was stated as living below the poverty line of less than $1.25 a day. Despite these achievements in reducing poverty, climatic shocks such as the 2007 and 2009 cyclones and the rising price of food and other commodities have stagnated the progress in reducing poverty. Vast disparities in income exist between groups, genders and regions. The reduction in the level of poverty has been rapid in areas such as Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet, whereas areas such as Rajshahi and Barisal have not experienced a substantial level of poverty reduction.

The world economy is currently experiencing the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression. The impact on LDCs like Bangladesh has been muted in the first and second instances. However, there is growing evidence that third round impacts are making themselves felt, manifested in declining exports, declining migration of labour and reduced growth.

**Climate Change**

Climate change may pose a grave threat to the national security of a nation and this is all the more prevalent in a low-lying disaster prone country like Bangladesh. The fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change states that a 1 meter rise in sea level will displace 14.8 million
people in Bangladesh. Climate change is predicted to exacerbate the state of environmental security by increasing the intensity and duration of natural disasters such as tropical cyclones, storm surges, floods, tornadoes and droughts. Climate change also affects the suitability of land for different types of crops, livestock, fish and pasture is predicted to have an impact on health and productivity of forests, the incidence of pests and diseases, biodiversity and ecosystems. Thus Climate change, combined with the environmental vulnerability of Bangladesh, may further exacerbate environment, food and water security threats.

**Terrorism**

During the first half of the last decade, Bangladesh experienced a number of terrorist acts. A series of serious attacks were mounted, particularly in 2004 and 2005. The violent nature of these incidents had convinced stakeholders in the government, civil society and general public, that if Bangladesh becomes susceptible to terrorist activities, it will have a severe impact on the stability, security and economic development of the country.

Bangladesh has successfully combated this menace through developing an effective counter terrorism regime. The counter terrorism regime in Bangladesh includes law enforcement and intelligence agencies, legal apparatus, relevant stakeholders of the government involved in countering terrorism in Bangladesh, media and civil society. This regime has been playing a significant role in containing terrorism in Bangladesh during the past three and a half years. As such, there have been no significant terror attacks in Bangladesh since 2005. Despite this, new threats of radicalization and terrorism have emerged that requires a
shift in the counter-terrorism efforts from the current emphasis on the use of hard power to a more inclusive, community-oriented model of countering terrorism. The threat of radicalization, particularly through the activities of organizations such as Hizb-ut Tahrir, needs to be tackled effectively through public and private engagement in communication and awareness activities.

**Conclusion**

The severity of Bangladesh’s non-traditional security threats has warranted concerted efforts by the government as well as Civil Society. Despite this, the threats from non-traditional security risks remain very high. It must be noted that these threats are all interconnected and therefore attention must be given to the most significant ones without ignoring the importance of the others. However, I would like to highlight one of the major issues that has attracted some attention in recent times: the possibility of a major earthquake in Bangladesh.

With more than 160 million people, Bangladesh is the most crowded place on earth. It sits on the world’s largest river delta, close to sea level, which exposes it to tsunamis and the possibility of rivers jumping their banks in the event of earthquake. Rapid unplanned urbanization and lax construction laws have resulted in ill constructed buildings, bridges and multi-story buildings that are extremely vulnerable to seismic activity. Scientists have come to recognize that it sits at the juncture of several active tectonic plate boundaries, including the tail end of the one that caused the 2004 Sumatra Tsunami that killed over 200,000 people. Analysts have warned that an earthquake near Dhaka could dwarf other modern tragedies.
One of the most relevant questions in today’s deliberation would be the significance of assessing non-traditional security threats as part of national security vetting and the role of NSI in this regard. The very nature of non-traditional security threats requires constant assessment and re-assessment of these issues. Perhaps a specialist cell may be formed to monitor the trends in the most significant non-traditional security threats in Bangladesh. Being the premier intelligence and security organization of the country, the NSI may have a role in the formulation of such an body.