

IT'S TIME TO EVOLVE A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS KASHMIR'S PROBLEMS, ELIMINATE PAKISTAN FROM EQUATION

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

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“Carthago delenda est” (Carthage must be destroyed) — a phrase incessantly mouthed by Senator Cato the Elder — was the manifestation of Rome’s visceral desire to wreak vengeance on its rival Carthage (in modern Tunisia), which had terrorised its lands for decades. The Third Punic War, fought with bows and arrows, resulted in the destruction of Carthage and a hundred and fifty thousand dead.

Today many in India, echoing Cato’s sentiments, declare publicly apropos Pakistan: “Enough is enough, let’s teach them a lesson.” Given past provocations, the sentiment may be unexceptionable. However, the price of “teaching a lesson” to a nuclear-armed neighbour could run into millions of lives and trillions worth of destruction with succeeding generations paying further instalments.

India’s national morale, subdued by decades of strategic inertia and timidity, has certainly received a boost during the present government’s tenure. First on account of the September 2016 cross-border strikes by our Special Forces and more recently, by the IAF air-strikes inside Pakistani territory. This long-overdue show of resolve has breached a self-imposed mental barrier that had served to freeze successive governments into immobility. Daunted by Rawalpindi’s threat of an early nuclear response, India withheld for years a conventional riposte to repeated Pakistani assaults via terrorist proxies.

The recent developments lend themselves to two conclusions. They have demonstrated that there is space, albeit limited, for conventional military operations under the subcontinental “nuclear overhang”. They also indicate that India’s promise of “massive retaliation” to nuclear first-use and their own instinct for self-preservation will prevent Pakistani generals from employing tactical nuclear weapons unless “in extremis”.

Would the Indian public, then, be justified in expecting punitive retaliation for every future Pakistan-launched terrorist attack? It is here that Indian politicians need to be cautioned that the exploitation of military operations for electoral gains not only trivialises their intended impact but can also whip up war hysteria, often difficult to control. The military has been considerably unsettled by a chief minister’s recent statement appropriating it for the aggrandisement of a political party.

While the recent air operations may have shattered the taboo against active retaliation, it must be recognised that Pakistan, regardless of its culpability, will feel obliged to respond to any Indian attack on its soil. It was fortuitous that the February 2019 aerial skirmishes ended in a stalemate but had any military targets been damaged on the ground, both belligerents would have been under immense pressure to up the ante. The resultant tit-for-tat escalatory spiral could have led to unforeseeable consequences.

While the turbulence of the post-Pulwama phase in India-Pakistan relations is far from over, the compulsions of India's rancorous election campaign coupled with Pakistan's internal tensions have created an incendiary subcontinental atmosphere, which could be easily ignited by inflammatory political rhetoric.

TV-studio warriors, who demand that Pakistan be instantly brought to its knees, need to be reminded that the very first step on the escalatory ladder requires preparation for full-scale war. Perhaps they overlook the reality that the Pakistani armed forces are no pushovers. Apart from their size (sixth-largest in the world), professional competence and nuclear arsenal, they have the huge advantage of a reliable source of military hardware in steadfast "iron brother" China. The Indian military, on the other hand, has not only been starved of funds by inadequate budgets but is also deprived of hardware by a lackadaisical Ministry of Defence. The failure of indigenisation programmes has left India dependent for weaponry on six-seven nations, some of them unreliable suppliers.

While assessing the effectiveness of the recently initiated diplomatic and economic measures, and the kinetic force employed, our national security establishment, as it contemplates future courses of action vis-a-vis Pakistan, needs to reflect with seriousness on two other major factors.

First, in Pakistan, we face a security-state controlled by a Praetorian army whose nexus with its Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency constitutes the all-powerful Pakistani "deep state". A revisionist Pakistan has set itself two primary aims — to wrest Kashmir from India and to retard India's economic growth and prevent its rise in the international arena. Given the balance of conventional forces and the presence of nuclear weapons, it is unlikely that Pakistan will ever succeed in its first aim. To thwart the second, all India has to do is sustain its trajectory of economic growth and technological/industrial development, leaving Pakistan far astern. But this assumes the absence of a major conflict.

The oxygen which keeps the deep state alive and sustains its relevance in the Pakistani public's eye is its Goebbelsian canard about an "existential threat" from a "Hindu India", which never accepted the concept of Pakistan, created Bangladesh and now intends further dismemberment by overt and covert means. Since peace with India will deprive the deep state of its *raison d'être*, it has successfully sabotaged every single Indian peace overture.

In such a scenario, India must make one of two policy choices of strategic import: One, either intensify Pakistani insecurities by irredentist talk of "greater India" and balkanisation of Pakistan. Or two, cut-off the deep state's oxygen supply by conveying an assurance of Pakistan's integrity, on the condition that it behaves responsibly.

The second factor that demands the closest attention is our national posture vis-a-vis the festering Kashmir issue. For decades, we have treated it simply as a consequence of Pakistan's strategy of "bleeding India through a thousand cuts" and employed band-aid solutions. Sizeable military forces have been deployed to deal with civil unrest on the assumption that once the symptoms are tackled the ailment would go away. Absent a "Kashmir Strategy" in New Delhi, the army's sacrifices to establish peace in the Valley have been in vain because a venal political class has never risen to the occasion to restore a functional civil administration.

The situation has taken an unfortunate turn. The prolonged and vicious cycle of violence and response, orchestrated by a malign ISI, has succeeded in alienating and radicalising Kashmiri youth, placing the ball squarely in India's court. It is time to evolve a 25-year strategy to address Kashmir's problems and eliminate Pakistan from the equation by ending alienation, providing employment, restoring civil administration and bringing Kashmir into the national mainstream.

This article first appeared in the print edition on April 3, 2019 under the title 'De-fanging the deep state'. The writer is a former chief of the Indian Navy. Views expressed are personal.

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