

INDIA URGENTLY NEEDS A NATIONAL SECURITY DOCTRINE, CLEAR RED LINES

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of External State & Non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security incl. Terrorism & illegal Migration

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As the nation mourns the tragic loss of 40 gallant CRPF jawans, killed in a “fidayeen” attack, our people are engulfed by emotions of grief, revulsion and anger. Stomach-churning visuals of the mangled CRPF vehicle speak of the technical expertise that went into the preparation of a powerful improvised explosive device (IED) as well as the detailed planning undertaken for this deadly ambush of the police convoy — this is certainly not the work of high school drop-outs or amateurs.

One of the first instances of a vehicle-borne IED being used in J&K, the success of this tactic could mark a new phase in the ongoing counter-insurgency operations. For this reason, and for preventing a recurrence of such tragedies, it is vital that an urgent review be undertaken of the quality and timeliness of intelligence inputs and the standard operating procedures (SOP) being followed by the armed police force convoys; especially if different from the army's.

In moments such as these, there is never a dearth of melodramatic and inflammatory rhetoric about instantly “visiting retribution” and “exacting revenge” from Pakistan. However, rather than the scope for any knee-jerk or emotional response, this tragic incident provides India yet another opportunity for reflection and introspection about our management of crisis situations in general, and of Pakistan's role in Kashmir, in particular.

At the core of any cogitation about Pakistan, firm focus needs to be retained on the centrality of its “deep state” — the unholy nexus of its army's General Headquarters and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) Directorate. This sinister entity is the self-appointed “guardian” of the Islamic state, and has an existential stake in keeping Kashmir ablaze through the steady, clandestine and deniable infusion of violence and terrorism.

The Old Testament contains a cautionary phrase, which warns: “If the trumpet giveth an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle?” Has India's political leadership, over the past 72 years, been sounding an “uncertain trumpet” by its woolly-headed thinking, lack of resolve and absence of a coherent long-term vision, thereby emboldening our adversaries? Crisis after crisis has caught our nation by surprise — unprepared and invariably in the reactive mode. Nothing illustrates the barrenness of New Delhi's prevailing strategic culture better than the failure of the Indian state to evolve a strategy for resolution of the Kashmir imbroglio. They have allowed, instead, this issue to become a pressure-point for exploitation by our western and eastern neighbours, separately and in collusion.

A myopic vision and blinkered outlook also seems to have frittered away India's advantages in many domains. Given India's significant conventional superiority and Pakistan's geographic vulnerability, it is ironical that the latter should have been able to wage war on us four times since Partition. On a parallel track, was Pakistan's three-decade-long strategy of “bleeding India by a thousand cuts” — using terrorists and religious fanatics — premised, at first, on India's

“strategic restraint”, and then on its own nuclear capability. No sooner had India assumed that Pokhran II would bring strategic stability, than it was thrown off-guard by Pervez Musharraf’s audacious but extremely foolish Kargil misadventure.

Amongst India’s major missteps has been the coining of the euphemism “cross-border terrorism” to describe, what were clearly, “acts of war” by Pakistan. Acts which were committed through training and arming fighters on its territory, and then, launching them, under its army’s covering fire, to wreak death and destruction on Indian soil. While this may have given India an excuse for exercising “strategic restraint”, the folly was compounded by describing Pakistani perpetrators as “non-state actors”; providing Pakistan the opening to declare that they were Kashmiri “freedom fighters”.

The Pulwama attack on our security forces marks just another step in the continuum of ISI’s ongoing “grab-Kashmir” campaign; more such steps will, no doubt, follow. As a fresh general election looms, the Indian voter needs to focus on the vexed issue of national security. A subject which actually demands first priority on the government’s and Parliament’s time: National security has suffered neglect for decades due to the intense and sustained pre-occupation of our politicians with electoral politics. This neglect is evident in the yawning gap between political pronouncements and the voids, increasingly evident, in our military capabilities — material as well as organisational.

In 2001, India mobilised over a million men in response to a terrorist attack on Parliament. A delay in positioning certain formations not only revealed the ponderous nature of India’s mobilisation plans, but also permitted Pakistan to counter-mobilise ahead of us. In 2008, a handful of seaborne terrorists held Mumbai hostage for 96 hours as India’s security apparatus muddled its way through the crisis. The lapses during the 26/11 crisis could have been condoned, had the right lessons been learnt from them.

But as the Pakistani fidayeen attacks on the Pathankot air base, followed by the Uri and Nagrota army camps — and now, Pulwama — showed, little had changed. Whether it is kidnappings, hijackings, terrorist strikes or other assaults on India’s sovereignty, we have been found wanting in an early and coherent response, because state functionaries lack SOPs for guidance. The September 2016 cross-border commando raids into Pakistan marked a welcome change that could have conveyed strong signals of national resolve and retribution. Regrettably, the absence of a policy underpinning that action and its exploitation for political gains, trivialised them, diluting their deterrent value.

We remain deficient in intelligence-analysis, inter-agency coordination, and, above all, a national security doctrine. Having created an elaborate national security framework, post Pokhran II, India has strangely shied away from promulgating a doctrine. Apart from diplomatic and economic steps that are being initiated, the current juncture would be apt for the urgent promulgation of a security-cum-defence doctrine. Such a document, whose public version defines India’s vital interests, aims and objectives will not only become the basis for strategy-formulation, contingency-planning and evolution of SOPs, but also send a reassuring message to our public.

Setting in place clear “red lines” for adversary nations and non-state entities will mean that, in future, no further notice is required for instant punitive or retaliatory actions for any infringement of India’s red lines.

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