

Diary of a very long year

“The surgical strike was a point we wanted to drive home, that the Line of Control is not a line that cannot be breached. When we want to, we will be able to breach it, go across and strike when we need. This was the message we wanted to convey and we did,” Lt. Gen. Devraj Anbu, the Northern Army Commander, stated in a recent press conference at his headquarters in Udhampur.

It has been one year since the special forces of the Indian Army carried out [surgical strikes](#) to destroy terror launchpads in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on September 29, 2016. It is important to take stock at this point on how India-Pakistan bilateral relations and the regional security situation have evolved over the past year since the strikes. Showing no appetite for a bilateral rapprochement, the two acrimonious neighbours have limited their interactions to firing across the borders in Jammu and Kashmir and calling each other names in global forums. At the United Nations General Assembly a few days ago, for instance, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj termed Pakistan a “pre-eminent exporter of terror” — to which Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Maleeha Lodhi, responded: “India is the mother of terrorism” in South Asia.

Crossing the Line of Control

The future direction of the foremost regional forum, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), remains unclear after India dropped out of the 2016 Islamabad summit in the wake of the Uri terror attack. (The summit was eventually postponed.) The regional security situation remains embattled, thanks to confused American policies in South Asia, continuing turmoil in Afghanistan, heightening India-China rivalry, and the India-Pakistan hostility.

From a regional stability point of view, the surgical strikes do not seem to have had much of an adverse impact. The fact that Pakistan neither acknowledged the attacks nor responded in kind shows that the general deterrence between the South Asian nuclear rivals remains intact. It is easy to talk about nuclear use and threaten nuclear retaliation, as Pakistan has been doing for long. It is, however, not easy to translate such talk into action. In that sense, the surgical strikes have called Pakistan’s nuclear bluff. And that certainly is good news for regional stability.

But such higher-level stability seems to have come with heightened lower-level instability — and that is the bad news. There are two sets of challenges that are more apparent today, one year after the surgical strikes. One, the India-Pakistan escalation ladder has become far more precarious today it has ever been in the past one and a half decades, i.e. since the ceasefire was agreed to in 2003. The recurrent, and almost daily, occurrence of border battles between the two militaries in Jammu and Kashmir today have a worrying potential for escalation to higher levels. The border stand-offs often lead to, as is evident from the data from the past 15 years, military, political and diplomatic escalation as well as contribute to escalating an ongoing crisis.

While this was common even prior to the surgical strikes, the September 2016 operation has made ceasefire violations more worrisome in at least two ways: first, Pakistan has been retaliating ever since the surgical strikes by increasing the pressure on the frontlines; and second, surgical strikes have reduced the critical distance between ceasefire violations and conventional escalation. While stealthy surgical strikes may not, strictly speaking, qualify as conventional escalation, they certainly reduce the psychological distance between sub-conventional violence and conventional escalation in the classical sense. That sure is bad news for regional stability.

The second challenge is more practical than theoretical. Conventional escalation as discussed in the academic/policy literature tends to put too much emphasis on pre-conceived and war-gamed

escalation scenarios. However, surgical strikes could easily offset the logic behind such familiar and analytically elegant scenarios. The perils of preventive strikes, in other words, are unpredictable. Preventive strikes are pregnant with immense potential to lead up to a 'competition in risk-taking', a tendency already prevalent on the frontlines of the India-Pakistan border in J&K. Put differently, preventive strikes in hyper-nationalist bilateral settings could defy our expectations and go out of control, with disastrous implications.

Have the surgical strikes helped the country's overall national security environment? The Central government argues that surgical strikes have been a spectacular success. Notwithstanding the more conceptual challenges I have explained above, let's try and break down this claim to see if indeed surgical strikes have improved our national security in plain practical terms. The first obvious question to ask is whether the strategy of punishment has worked *vis-à-vis* Pakistan.

There are two reasons why the strategy of punishment may not have worked. For one, a strategy of punishment requires consistency and commitment. The momentum achieved by the surgical strikes was not followed up (despite several attacks thereafter), nor was the government committed to its declared determination to respond firmly to terror strikes, thereby lacking in both consistency and commitment. Second, and more importantly, Pakistan's responses thereafter of supporting insurgency in Kashmir, aiding infiltration across the border, and allegedly supporting attacks on the Indian army convoys and bases continued without much reaction from New Delhi. This has led to a visible lack of credibility on New Delhi's part which makes one wonder whether, bereft of domestic political uses, there was any strategic planning behind the September operation.

By all accounts, India's national security environment is fraught today. Terror attacks in Kashmir continue to break the calm. Consider Gen. Anbu remarks: "Large number of terrorist camps and launch pads exist across south and north of Pir Panjal, they have not decreased... Launch pads and terrorist camps have increased since last year."

Let's also look at some figures from J&K. Credible media reports show that 110 militants, and 38 army personnel were killed between January and September 2016 (i.e. prior to the surgical strikes). However, since the surgical strikes, at least 178 militants and 69 Army personnel have been killed. Forty-four army personnel were killed between January and September this year, compared to 38 last year between January and September (including those killed in the Uri Army base attack). One might argue that the terrorist casualties have also gone up. While that is true, more militants killed can be a barometer of the level of militancy too.

Surgical strikes, then, may have been a tactical victory for New Delhi, but its strategic value is far from settled.

With two hostile neighbours on either side, terror attacks against India on the rise, and the South Asian neighbourhood unsure of India's leadership any more, New Delhi has a lot to be concerned about the continuation of its pivotal position in the region and the nature of its future engagement with it. The events since September last year have further contributed to South Asia's regional 'insecurity complex'. For a country that has traditionally been the regional stabiliser, New Delhi seems to be quickly embracing the virtues of geopolitical revisionism. The costs of aggression, self-imposed regional exclusion and an absence of strategic altruism are bound to become starker sooner or later.

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