



# Hit Where it Hurts

The recent strikes against terrorists in Myanmar showed a paradigm shift in India's national strategy



**BATTLE READY** Indian Army personnel carrying out operations in Keran sector of J&K

ON 9 JUNE 2015, THE GOVERNMENT of India demonstrated an unprecedented political will to carry out punitive strikes against terrorist groups. In a swift albeit well planned and flawlessly executed special operation, troops of 21 Parachute (Special Forces) battalion in concert with the Indian Air Force (IAF) executed a surgical strike inside Myanmar, killing over 40 insurgents and injuring several more of Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), believed to be responsible for the ambush in Chandel district of Manipur that killed 18 soldiers on June 4.

Operation WaghnaKh was carried out four-five km inside Myanmar on the so called 'safe havens' camps of the insurgent groups, based on specific, accurate and real time intelligence. The predawn cross border surgical strike was purportedly given the 'Green On' personally by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on

his return from Bangladesh. It is also reported that the operation was cleared by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) immediately after the June 4 ambush and slated for an early launch; accordingly, the National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval did not accompany the Prime Minister to Bangladesh. The Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Dalbir Singh postponed his visit to the UK, and rightly sought additional time for detailed planning, preparation and co-ordination to ensure flawless execution and success of operations, rather than a premature launch with high probability of failure.

A major weakness in our security structure has been the lack of credible and accurate intelligence or rather the lack of coordination among various agencies. To execute a cross border mission, the foremost requirement is of accurate and real time intelligence and for that all agencies need to function in

concert and not in conflict. It is reported that the NSA personally took charge and coordinated the operational intelligence, in addition to his many other tasks. 21 Parachute (Special Forces) battalion was tasked as it is one of the most battle hardened and combat rich force having been deployed in the Northeast mostly, ever since its conversion. Cross border missions are sensitive and delicate with zero room for error. Even a minor mistake can lead to failure and cause national embarrassment. The need is also to ensure that there is no collateral damage as at times women and children are also housed in these camps in addition to local villagers who are employed for daily chores. For an operation of this nature to succeed there has to be synergy among all elements of national power, that is the diplomatic, informational, military and political. In this particular instance there was obvious synergy with a political will

backed by a professional militarily coordinated surgical strike. The ministry of external affairs (MEA) ensured approvals from a cooperative Myanmar government for Indian troops to cross over and an initially well laid out information campaign with the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) issuing a very nuanced statement. It is another issue that this got later hijacked for political compulsions to take immediate credit and an uncalled for hurry to send a direct message to Pakistan once the realisation dawned on the unmatched success and likely takeaways. The fact that the politico-military-diplomatic will was demonstrated is in itself adequate and an apt signal for Pakistan that henceforth terrorist attacks will not go unpunished.

Contrary to the general belief, this is neither a covert nor a clandestine operation. Covert operations are deniable and cannot be traced back to the organisation or country of origin. A clandestine operation differs from a covert operation as in a covert operation the identity of the sponsor is concealed while in a clandestine operation the operation itself is concealed. Operation Waghna-kh is a straightforward punitive strike carried out as a collaborative effort with the Myanmar authorities. DGMO, while issuing a statement, took care to mention that the attack was carried out along the India-Myanmar border and termed it a preemptive operation possibly based on intelligence inputs of similar ambushes being planned by the insurgent groups. However, the timing of operation and the sequence leaves no doubt that this is a 'punitive' operation.

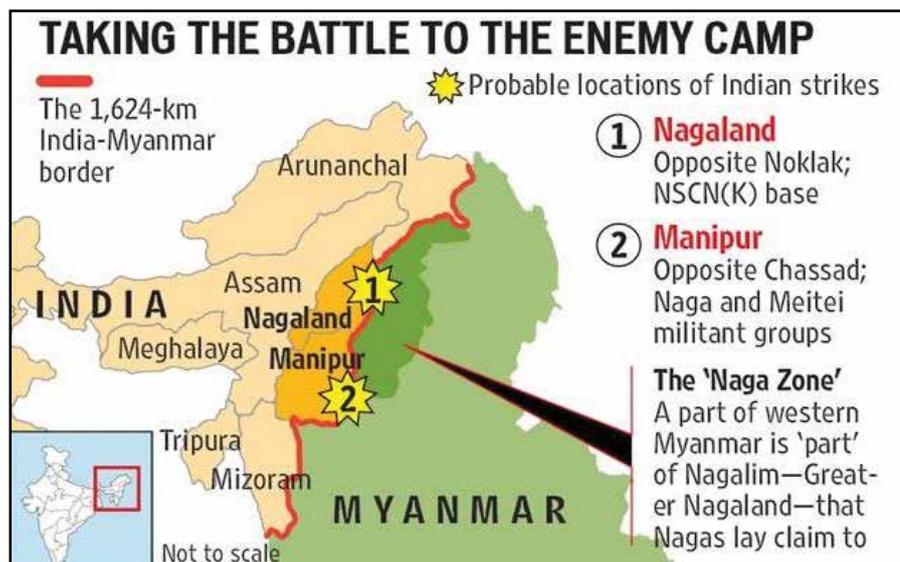
India has been at the receiving end of

terrorism and insurgencies for over half a century. Terror wars or terrorism is an ever present global threat. The intensity, frequency, scope and space of terrorism is on the rise. With the advent and easy accessibility of modern weaponry and explosives, terror attacks are now more devastating and destructive with the aim of imposing the will and ideology of the terror groups, mostly waging a war against a duly elected government. There is also an ever present danger of terrorist organisations acquiring or taking control of nuclear weapon(s) and triggering it in target countries to cause massive destruction. The implications are clear, India needs to review its strategy to deal with both impending terror threats and retribution to terrorist acts, especially those emanating from across our borders.

It should also be noted that there are major differences in the dynamics of insurgencies in the Northeast and the proxy war being waged by Pakistan including the state (ISI) sponsored and controlled terrorism. Insurgencies in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura are home-grown and violence levels are sub critical except in Manipur. The Indian Army crossed over to Myanmar with the consent of Myanmar to deal with insurgents who are Indian nationals. In Jammu and Kashmir, the violence is perpetuated by Pakistan. The terrorists who carry out subversive activities in Indian territory are mostly Pakistanis or foreign mercenaries. Therefore, a single template or one-size-fit-all is not a workable solution. However, a demonstrated counterterrorism doctrine or strategy which overtly propagates 'punitive' and 'preemptive' strikes

to safeguard our nationals and national interests will deter Pakistan from carrying out terror strikes, with impunity.

The surgical strike is an unequivocal message to all terrorist organisations insurgent groups and the neighbouring countries who provide safe havens, material and moral support to them. The government spokespersons lost no time and opportunity to tell Pakistan that henceforth terrorist attacks initiated by them will not go unpunished. This elicited an expected response from Pakistan, as always raising the nuclear rhetoric and the first use doctrine, reminding India that Pakistan was not Myanmar. Uncertainty in certainty itself can be an effective psychological weapon and the government should have left it to Pakistan to conjecture the response India will or will not give to a Pakistan sponsored terrorist attack, by its so called non-state actors. While the NE insurgencies are better managed both at the political and military level, it is the Pakistan sponsored and supported proxy war and terrorism that continues to be a major threat to national security. There have been numerous high profile, high visibility terrorist attacks on soft targets mainly civilians, perpetrated by Pakistan. Unfortunately, our own response has been weak and hence we as a nation continue to suffer these attacks in perpetuity. Unlike the present, the previous government chose to give a clean hit to Pakistan army when it carried out an ambush on an Indian army patrol in Poonch in August 2013, wherein five soldiers were killed. The then Raksha Mantri made a statement in Parliament that it was an attack by terrorists (dressed in Pakistan army uni-



**MASTER MIND** NSA Ajit Doval



form). However, the ministry of defence (MoD) missed out in changing the heading in the original statement given by the DGMO blaming the Pakistan army for the attack, thus causing an avoidable embarrassment to the nation and emboldening the Pakistan army. The present stance taken by the government is indeed a just and bold one and changes the rules of the game.

India has responded only once, that is to the terrorist attack on the Parliament in December 2001, with the armed forces launching Operation Parakram, but again fell short and did not take it to the logical conclusion, letting Pakistan get away with an assessment that India lacked the will to raise the ante and thus, emboldening them to carry out more terrorist strikes at our metros and other high value targets. The year-long deployment did achieve a limited

aim of raising the cost of proxy war for Pakistan, which given its failing economy it can ill afford. However, the fact that Pakistan did avoid a retribution after an attack on Parliament, which is a national symbol and should have been construed as a declaration of war, is a victory for Pakistan and indicative of India as a soft state. Pakistan plays the nuclear card at every instance. When there was anger and anguish in India on the beheading of a soldier in January 2013, Pakistan high commissioner in New Delhi was heard on Indian TV channels saying that Pakistan is a nuclear power and India will be well advised to refrain from escalating the situation. Post June 9 punitive operations, Pakistan defence experts including their former president Gen. Pervez Musharraf and the interior minister have again taken to the rhetoric of being a nuclear armed nation with

first use doctrine and India should not make the mistake of thinking that Pakistan is a Myanmar. Pakistan's defence minister, Khawaja Asif, also brought up the possibility of nuclear war should India ever launch a similar incursion into Pakistan. Pakistan is right that it is not Myanmar. Myanmar does not sponsor or support a proxy war against India. Pakistan would have realised that for once India has sounded the bugle and it better beware of the consequences the next time it perpetuates a terrorist attack against India.

What are the options for India? The first option for India is to suffer terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistan in 'perpetuity', from the fear that any response may escalate to war and possibly nuclear war. This is exactly what Pakistan wants India to believe. The only rational response has been at the diplomatic level and that is 'to talk or not to talk'. This approach has not yielded the desired results what with the perpetrators of even the Mumbai terror attacks not only getting away scot-free, but possibly planning more such attacks. The second option is to carry out covert operations inside Pakistan, this too is not a good option for India as it will not assuage a growing public sentiment as these operations are deniable and secondly, given the internal security situation in Pakistan, where major terrorist attacks occur regularly, it may not serve the purpose unless, of course, India was to target and destroy a Hafeez Saeed, Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, Dawood Ibrahim or a Syed Salahuddin, all fair targets. The third and viable option is a punitive strike similar to Operation WaghnaKh. The challenge for India will be to control the escalation ladder. In this option, 'Jus ad Bellum' (just war) is with India. Pakistan for a quarter century now has indulged in a proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir and the ISI masterminded terrorist attacks with impunity in a secure belief that its nuclear weapons are an assured deterrence. The rules seem to have changed, the PM Narendra Modi led government has gone vocal over retaliation and it will now be a political compulsion for the government which will need to assuage public sentiment. India is a responsible nation, however, public tolerance to terrorist attacks has reached a limit, and public sentiment fuelled by a hyperactive media and an expectation to react will compel the government to give a befitting response. A trigger by a Pakistan engineered terrorist attack on Indian soil, say something

**PROTECTING VITAL ASSETS** Indian Navy's MARCOS during maritime security drill in the Krishna-Godavari basin





**IN FULL GLORY** Indian Army's Para commandos during Republic Day parade

like 26/11, Mumbai, will leave India with no choice but to respond. The fourth option is war, as former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee put it: “*Aar Paar ki Ladai*”, this is, of course, an extreme option, and may not really achieve the desired end state in the long run.

The dynamics of a punitive strike against Pakistan are different than Myanmar, though the principle remains the same. In addition to the synergy achieved between the political, military, diplomatic and informational elements of national power, India needs formal structures mandated to execute special operations and the Special Forces (SF) fully equipped and ready to carry out such operations with minimum notice. The first and the foremost need is to raise the Special Operations Command (SOC). This command should be directly responsible and accountable to the highest decision making body that is the PM and the CCS. The British SAS is believed to have had a billboard at their base, at Credenhill, Herefordshire, during the Falkland War which said, “When we play Maggie plays”. Maggie, of course, referred to the then Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher.

The success of the Myanmar operation was possible only because there was a direct control at all levels from the PM, COAS and DGMO downwards to the tactical level. The coordination between the army, air force, various intelligence agencies and other essential organs at present is neither structured nor systematic.

India and the armed forces need to include ‘punitive and preemptive operations’ as an integral part of the national strategy and doctrine. Ad hocism has its own pitfalls and just because it has succeeded once it does not imply that the capabilities and structures are optimal. It is now an imperative to synergise the Special Operations Forces (SOF) under a single command to meet future challenges. The structure of SOF is an indicator of a nation’s will and capabilities to safeguard its interests, the capability to project hard power and political signalling. As such operations have international ramifications, the national polity needs to comprehend the options and the associated risk sensitivity compared to out of proportion results and limited escalation dynamics. An integrated organisation composed of SOF of the three services with dedicated lift and insertion capabilities, a formal interface with intelligence agencies, and more importantly a procurement wing empowered to equip the SOF with state-of-the-art weapons and equipment is a prerequisite. The role, tasks, organisation and command and control structures have been detailed in the April issue of FORCE.

The SF have major arms and equipment requirements which need to be procured on the fast track mode or by way of empowered committees. The equipment needs of SF are far different from that of the infantry and the army. The SF requires state-of-the-art specialist equipment and as these are mostly

limited in quantities, hence the preferred option is to buy global. There is an urgent requirement to procure over a thousand Combat Freefall Parachutes, light strike vehicles, underwater diving equipment, sniper rifles, anti-tank guided missiles, multi calibre assault rifles, CQB weapons, man portable air defence systems (VSHORADS), laser target designators, body armour, ballistic helmets, night vision devices, communication equipment, mountaineering equipment, heavy drop equipment, aerial delivery systems and specialised explosives. The normal procurement through Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2013, is not an option due to long lead times required and the cumbersome procedures. A proposal to fast track procurements by empowering a special committee, similar to the special clothing and equipment committee for Siachen has been under consideration with the government for over three years now. Given the changed resolve, the Raksha Mantri should sanction this at the earliest.

Pakistan for far too long has continued with the proxy war with impunity. It is now essential that ‘punitive and preemptive’ operations should be an integral part of the stated national strategy. India also needs to structure, equip and empower SOF to effectively meet envisaged and mandated security challenges. ||

*(The writer is a former DGMO and Colonel of the Parachute Regiment)*