

PATHANKOT AND BEYOND - THE DEVIL'S ALTERNATIVE

“What I am saying is basically that history tells you that those who damage you, if they don't realise what pain they inflict, then they don't change,”

Shri Manohar Parrikar
Raksha Mantri
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Is the Pakistan perpetrated terror attack at the Pathankot air force base the ‘Tipping Point’?

India's dilemma has been to hit back at Pakistan after a terror attack perpetrated from across the borders or continue to suffer such attacks in near perpetuity. Hitting back has the possibility of escalation and retarding India's growth trajectory and development and not hitting back emboldens Pakistan to continue with its “ low cost high effect” proxy war on India, including high profile terror strikes such as one on the Indian Parliament, Mumbai(1993, 2006 serial blasts and 26/11), Delhi, Pune, Akshardham and many others. There have been a spate of terrorist attacks in the last few months from Pathankot to Pampore, and these are likely to continue. Subtle changes can be discerned in these attacks with Pathankot airbase being a game changer in many ways and hence needs to be analysed in some detail to chart out future response options.

It will be incorrect to state that the terrorist attack on the Pathankot Air Force base in the early hours of second January was a return gift from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to Prime Minister Modi's bold and statesman like visit to Lahore, an initiative to further the engagement and set in motion a peace process. It will also be incorrect to state that Jaish-E- Mohammed (JEM) terrorist who executed the attack did so without orders and active support of the Pakistan army/ ISI. The Pathankot terrorist strike is the continuation of the Pakistan Army's operational philosophy of bleeding India with a ‘thousand cuts’ and ensuring that both the powers that be in India and Pakistan well comprehend that the army drives Pakistan's India policy.

The Pathankot terrorist attack presents India with a ‘Devil's Alternative’, in case India now cancels or pends all engagements, it plays into the hands of the terrorist and their masters, and if it does not then it should be prepared for similar terrorist attacks in perpetuity, as has been the practice till now. Another viable alternative is to respond in a befitting military manner, the ‘Jus ad Bellum’ is with India and an equitable and proportional response is in order. However, any response has its own ramifications as Pakistan talks either at the sub conventional or at the nuclear domain of the conflict spectrum, well knowing that it can not match India in a conventional conflict. Pakistan will continue to operate in the sub conventional domain while threatening in the Nuclear domain, knowing well that it can not counter India's

conventional superiority. In the event of the terrorist attacks continuing India will be left with no option but to respond militarily, as tolerance levels and the patience of 125 crore people have run out of steam.

Fortunately for the two nuclear armed nations and the people, the Pathankot terrorist strike did not or could not destroy the air assets, had that happened it would have been a near certain initiation of war. The ultimate aim of the terrorist or rather their masters is open to debate. It is fair to presume that as Pathankot is a frontline air base the air assets were the obvious target, however, an analysis of the terrorist strike and the sequence and time of infiltration, movement and attack leads to the conclusion that the air assets were never the target. The aim was straight and simple to execute a high visibility attack to derail the engagement. The attack is as per an established pattern and was expected. There is a discernable pattern, a direct correlation between talks and terror. India's stated position is that talks and terror can not go together, on the other hand Pakistan has demonstrated direct linkages between talks and terror. The Ufa meeting between the two Prime Ministers on 10 July 2015 was followed by the terrorist attack at Dinanagar (Gurdaspur) on 27 July, effectively derailing the scheduled NSA talks. The terrorist attack at an army camp at Samba on 26 Sep 2013 preceded the meeting between the two Prime Ministers scheduled on 29 Sep at New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The historic bus yatra to Lahore by PM Vajpayee in Feb 1999 was paid back by large scale intrusions by Pakistan army in Kargil leading to a war. Again the July 2001 Agra summit between the PMs was followed in October 2001 deadly attack on the J&K assembly and thereafter the 13/12 attack on the Indian Parliament, which led to an year long mobilisation for war in the form of Operation Prakaram, and the formulation of the much discussed and debated India's so called 'Cold Start Doctrine'. 26/11 Mumbai attacks, the mother of all terrorist strikes followed the then Pakistan's newly elected civilian president Zardari saying that India is not a threat. All these attacks emanated from Pakistan duly orchestrated, engineered and executed by the Pakistan army and effectively setback any attempts to further the peace process and improved relations.

Much has already been written and spoken on the Pathankot terror attack and much more will continue to engage the Government, Army, Airforce and the defence analyst. The Army and Air Force as also the NSG will certainly carry out an indepth study while preparing the after action report and arrive at remedial measures to address the causative factors of a prolonged and not so effectively executed operation, as also revamp the security of defence installations. A quick recapitulation of the modus operandi is a must to highlight some important shifts and arrive at India's response options to identify additional capabilities and capacities to meet similar challenges in the future.

It is believed that JeM terrorist infiltrated from Bamiyal which is reportedly a known route for smuggling and drug running. The terrorist who carried out the Dinanagar attack too had reportedly infiltrated in the same general area. The infiltration is feasible only with the active

assistance of the Pakistan Rangers, who are under the operational command and control of the Pakistan Army. Having infiltrated on the new year eve in Indian army combat uniform, the terrorist travelled 31 kms from Bamiyal to Tajpur village (periphery of Pathankot airbase) after commandeering SP Salwinder Singh's SUV, which of course had all the trappings of a VIP vehicle including the blue beacon, which gave them the authority to move without being challenged. The terrorist well known for fighting without remorse or pity were magnanimous enough to spare the occupants of the SUV including the SP. After having safely reached the village on the periphery of the airbase in the early hours of 01 Jan, the terrorist decide to wait and lie doggo for the next 24 hours and attack the airbase on 02 Jan morning at around 0330 hours. Had the air assets been the target the terrorists would never have waited for 24 hours to initiate the attack, well knowing that the MIG 21s and the MI 35 can be relocated to any other base in no time. Another aspect which defies logic is the fact that the terrorists could lie doggo for 24 hours. It is a well known fact that given the very high density of ex servicemen and serving soldiers and the unmatched Punjabi hospitality and the respect for the army, someone or the other will approach men in uniform offering milk, food, shelter and more so the small talk of the regiment and the army. As to how these well armed JeM terrorist in Indian army combat uniform went unnoticed needs to be scrutinised , as some sort of collusive support by one or more persons is likely, the nexus between narcotics smuggling and terror will provide the answers.

Even before the Pathankot attack was successfully terminated, Pakistan controlled Taliban Afghanistan targeted the Indian consulate at Mazar- e- Sharif on 06 Jan. In Feb, the Lashkar - e-Taiba carried out another high visibility terror attack on the outskirts of Srinagar at Pampore, wherein unfortunately three Special Forces personnel were martyred including two officers Capts Pawan Kumar and Tushar Mahajan, in addition to two CRPF Jawans.

The Pathankot terror attack and those preceding and proceeding when analysed lead to certain important inferences which will provide critical inputs to Pakistan's intent and India's response options. These are:-

- Pakistan calibrated the attack to ensure that they do not cross India's 'perceived' Red Line, keeping the damage below the terror threshold. Accordingly future terror attacks perpetrated from across the borders are likely to be 'high visibility' and not 'high profile' attacks like Mumbai (26/11).
- Established pattern of linkages of high visibility terror attacks and talks will continue. Engagements at the political- diplomatic level are likely to be either preceded or proceeded by terror attacks by Pakistan's state proxy.
- Pakistan will continue to operate in the sub conventional domain while talking/ threatening in the Nuclear domain, flouting the newly acquired tactical nuclear Nasr Missile and a "First Use' doctrine.

- Tactical actions will have strategic ramifications.
- Pakistan's proxy war is expanding in scope to include North Punjab.
- It is for the first time that a Joint Investigation Team(JIT) from Pakistan will be visiting India and the site of the Pathankot attack.
- India will need to define, propagate and pursue an effective doctrine to raise the costs and deter Pakistan from perpetuating terror attacks on India and Indian nationals and assets abroad with impunity.

Over the last quarter of a century since Pakistan started the 'Low Cost High Affect' terror war nearly 2000 Indians have been killed in over 50 incidents. Except for the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on 13 Dec 2002, which led to an year long deployment of the Armed Forces in "OP PARAKRAM", all other attacks have elicited no response at the military level. The Indian outrage and anguish has generally been short lived and with time it has been business as usual. Pakistan's controlled terror organisations have succeeded in engineering and perpetuating the terror strikes with impunity on the Indian people taking shelter of the twin strategy of deniability and escalation to the nuclear domain. These so called 'non state actors' have been exploited to create trouble and ensure the Indian security forces remain engaged in low intensity conflict operations. The tolerance level, of the Indian public has now run the course and with a hyper TV media which has literally brought the terror strikes to the bedrooms and drawing rooms, questions are being asked as to why should India suffer such attacks in perpetuity. In this context, Pathankot and Pampore may be a game changer. Much is expected from a strong Modi led government. Raksha Mantri Shri Manohar Parrikar while addressing a military gathering stated "that any individual or organization, harming the country should also receive the pain of such activities and how, when and where should be our choice". This statement itself should be a warning to Pakistan and hence there is an imperative to prepare a range of responses at the political, diplomatic, economic and above all at the military level to deter Pakistan from carrying terror strikes in India by the 'deep state'.

India on its part also needs to synergise its response. After the Pathankot attack and similarly earlier after Gurdaspur in July 2015 and Samba Sep 2013, while all acknowledged that the terrorist infiltrated from Pakistan and carried out these attacks, the Border Security Force (BSF) which is mandated for border guarding and anti infiltration operations along the international border went public saying that "no infiltration had taken place". Coming from the institution of the government it only causes embarrassment to India and strengthens the adversaries claims in the international community. Another major concern is that these terrorist and their organisations are loosely and without thought termed as 'Non State Actors' by Indians. This being a Pakistani narrative, and by terming them as such it absolves the Pakistani government, who continue to wage this war. It is an established fact that all terrorist organisations are funded, supported, sponsored, housed, trained and controlled by the ISI which is an integral part of the Pakistan Army, and hence these are state proxys and not non state actors.

Raksha Mantri, Shri Manohar Parrikar post the Pathankot attack expressed his concern echoing the nation's anguish saying "The country's capacity for tolerance is over. As defence minister, my tolerance capacity is over, we will do something" adding that the government knows what was required to be done. He went on to say "that any individual or organisation harming the country should also receive the pain of such activities, how, when and where should be our choice". This clear and categorical statement should set the strategic community, diplomatic and military top brass thinking of the many effective options available, that deters Pakistan from waging this terror war and at the same time is in concert with India's growth story. India is a risen and responsible regional power. The more India rises and grows, the more Pakistan will endeavour to retard this growth by increasing the net cost of security. Equally important is the hyphenation or equivalence which Pakistan wants with India, to ensure prominence in the world community and dominance in the region. Though Pakistan is seen by the world as a fountainhead of terror, however, Pakistan exploiting its geo-strategic location, proclaimed nuclear power status with an ever increasing arsenal and the consequences to the world as a failed state continues to draw support from US, China and the Islamic nations.

The key question is what are the plausible response options for India. The Indian strategic community is divided on the response options to Pakistan sponsored terrorism. Most propagate 'talking to Pakistan in the same language' and 'talking to Pakistan in the language it understands'. The options for India are limited. One option is to suffer the Pakistan sponsored terror attacks in perpetuity and keep the nation focused on the path of development and economic growth. An option which is perceived by the intellectual community as the only natural and plausible option. The more hawkish of the community openly propagate teaching Pakistan a lesson and some go to the extent of seeking the balkanisation of Pakistan. Fortunately they are just a handful who talk of the two extremes. A more pragmatic approach may be somewhere in taking the middle path, a mix of talk, tact and threat.

Prime Minister Modi has reached out to Mr Nawaz Sharif in a bid to normalize relations, by first inviting him for the swearing in ceremony in May 2014 and then to his statesman like Lahore visit on 24th Dec 2015. The two prime ministers have met on five occasions in the last twenty months with a likelihood of meeting again in end march, on the sidelines of the nuclear summit in Washington DC. There have been engagements at the political - diplomatic level between the foreign ministers, NSA's and foreign secretaries. These engagements of course have not been without attendant controversies and rigid positions taken mainly by Pakistan in refusing to talk terror. Prime Minister Modi's Pakistan policy has been much debated, in essence it has been a two pronged policy of a 'conciliatory' and a 'retaliatory' approach. It is important to engage with Pakistan at the political and diplomatic level despite knowing well that the India policy is dictated by the Pakistan Army and without the express

directions of Pakistan Army no move forward is possible. Given the dynamics and power play in Pakistan establishment and its success with the state proxy's as an instrument of waging a continuous war on India in the sub conventional domain, India will need to prepare and execute a set of responses synergizing all elements of national power, mainly Diplomatic, Economic, Military and Informational. India maintains the second largest Army, the fourth largest Air Force and a blue water navy. The Armed Forces are professional, committed and capable of defending India. Many among the strategic community tend to believe the Pakistani narrative that any military initiative by India will escalate to a nuclear war and India will be solely responsible for it. Pakistan by openly propagating its so called "Irrationality" 'first use' doctrine and TNW has balanced Indian conventional war superiority by operating at the sub conventional domain and threatening to escalate to the nuclear domain, in the event of any Indian military response. At the smallest of incidents the Pakistani establishment and commentators take to the nuclear rhetoric. In the event of a terror strike from Pakistan, the 'Jus ad Bellum' is with India. India at some point of time will need to give an equitable and proportional response.

On 09 Jun 2015, India successfully launched punitive operations against the NSCN(K) in Myanmar, demonstrating a politico- military will to effectively retaliate to terrorists groups waging a war against India. Punitive and pre-emptive operations should be an integral part of the military sub conventional doctrine. The terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan especially across the Line of Control (LC) is intact, with 42 terrorist camps which house and train terrorist. These terrorist camps can be targeted and destroyed either by surgical strikes by the special forces or by long range vectors carrying out a precision strike. Punitive strikes against terrorist camps of organizations perpetuating attacks on Indian soil are a viable and effective option. The retaliation of course should be at a place and time of own choosing. This will have a deterrent effect, as it will raise the costs of Pakistan in maintaining these camps so close to the LC and the border. These attacks will also destroy the terrorist assets and assuage the public sentiments in India as also signal to the Pakistan establishment that India will no longer tolerate terror. An effective retaliation will need accurate and actionable intelligence and should be well calibrated, coordinated and executed. Punitive operations should factor in an equitable and proportional response, with the armed forces fully prepared for any escalation by Pakistan. It should be understood that operational preparedness and readiness guarantees peace and deters the adversary from escalating and upping the ante. Military retaliation of course will need to be fully supported by political and diplomatic initiatives.

Many experts propagate 'talking to Pakistan in the same language' by creating covert capabilities and carrying out deniable operations inside Pakistan. This of course apparently seems the best and most plausible option as India raises the costs for Pakistan and hits where it hurts. The covert pay back option though attractive comes with attendant issues, for one India as a responsible nation (unlike Pakistan) does not support or propagate terrorists anywhere in the world. By supporting and sponsoring terror, India puts itself in the same league as Pakistan, which is not desirable. The principle and fundamental of covert operations is wrong, though it is

another matter that even if supported, these will have little or no impact on Pakistan, given the number and intensity of such attacks already taking place inside Pakistan. The violence levels are very high due to an unstable internal security situation in spite of the much touted success of operation Zab e Azb. Over 50,000 people have been killed in terrorist and sectarian violent incidents in Pakistan since 2001. Covert operations is not a preferred option as it is against India's policy and standing in the world as a peaceful and responsible nation state. India should however create covert capabilities and build requisite strategic assets, to take out and neutralize individuals who openly perpetuate violence and hatred against India. The likes of Hafeez Saeed, Dawood Ibrahim, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, Masood Azhar and Syed Salahuddin are fair targets and need to be taken out as a response to demonstrate India's resolve to counter terrorism emanating from Pakistani soil.

Pakistan army is concerned and apprehensive on account of India's superiority in conventional warfare in particular the 'Cold Start Doctrine'. Though India denies having a cold start doctrine calling it a proactive strategy, the fact is that Pakistan is concerned. From Pakistan's view the doctrine has been specifically developed as an aggressive way of war fighting aimed to destroy them, wherein Indian Military conducts offensive operations as unified battle groups inside Pakistan territory at the earliest post incident. Pakistan army's new concept of war fighting is indeed designed to counter the Cold Start Doctrine. The Indian Army should relocate some of its combat power and logistics unit to further operationalise and strengthen its war fighting capabilities and fine tune the Pro-active strategy, in the event of a conventional retaliation to a high profile attack perpetrated by Pakistan, like Mumbai 26/11 or attack on Parliament. Had the terrorists in Pathankot succeeded in destroying the strategic assets of the fighter and rotary wing aircraft, India may have been driven to respond in an appropriate, equitable and effective measure. A credible military threat of a conventional war will force Pakistan to realign its proxy war strategy to ensure that they do not cross the Indian 'Red lines' and the tolerance threshold. In the event of a conventional war consequent to escalation by Pakistan, India should be prepared to degrade the adversary's military capability in a swift short war.

As a subset of military coercion, another effective retaliation and response mechanism could be to punish the Pakistan rangers or army post(s) which facilitates infiltrators. Like for the Pathankot attack it is well established that the terrorists belonging to Jaish infiltrated from opposite Bamiyal. The Indian Army could inflict a severe punishment by a fire assault on the post abetting infiltration. Though ceasefire was unilaterally declared by Pakistan on 26 Nov 2003, Pakistan Army and rangers deliberately violate the ceasefire to facilitate and assist infiltration. The number and intensity of ceasefire violations spiked in 2014-2015, but an effective and immediate retaliation ordered by the BJP government and the Chief of the Army Staff Gen Dalbir Singh, forced the Pakistan Army to abide by the cease fire. Effective retaliation

along the LC and parts of the IB has ensured relative peace. Similarly an immediate and effective retaliation on post(s) facilitating infiltration is a good response option.

The political and diplomatic engagement should continue. There is no alternative to that and India can hope that the dialogue will be carried forward and contribute to normalising relations to an extent even if these are temporary. Sports, cultural and people to people contact should be calibrated to deter Pakistan from constantly needling India. There have been positive shifts in the last year and half which need to be consolidated. The Ufa agreement was positive though it did not give dividends as expected. The major shift has been the appointment of Lt Gen Naser Khan Janjua as Pakistan's NSA. As he is purportedly a nominee of the Pakistan Army Chief, he will be in a better position to ensure a positive atmosphere and move ahead in conjunction with the Indian NSA, Mr Ajit Doval. While we keep Pakistan engaged at the political - diplomatic level, it is also important to engage Pakistan at the military level, as Pakistan Army drives the India Policy. A direct channel exists in the 'DGMO hotline' who have scheduled telephonic conversation once a week and can call up each other as and when warranted. The DGMO hotline has proved effective many times in controlling a crisis situation and lowering temperatures. 2013 also saw a large number of cease fires and a DGMOs meeting at Wagah was held at the invitation of the Pakistan DGMO Maj Gen Amir Riaz with the Indian DGMO Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia in December 2013. The meeting conducted in a cordial atmosphere resulted in a constructive dialogue and better understanding leading to sustained ceasefire for the next seven months. The meeting between the DGMOs should be formalized and could be held every six months, each side hosting it alternatively.

The numerous options and initiatives at the diplomatic and economic level have deliberately not been detailed as these are already being perused and are calibrated based on the prevalent situation. These engagements and initiatives should continue unabated and India's strengths should be leveraged in the international community to restrain Pakistan. The economic and political isolation of Pakistan is not a feasible option as it enjoys the support of both US and China. China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is central to China's 'One Belt One Road (OBOR)' project and access to Gwadar is critical to Chinese economic, energy and military needs. The US too continues to support Pakistan despite it sheltering Osama Bin Laden, US has given an unprecedented 18 bn dollar aid mostly military which allows Pakistan to narrow the conventional gap with India. The six F-16s are only an addition to the long list of military hardware supplied by the US to strengthen the Pakistan Military.

Pathankot has possibly been a game changer, wherein Pakistan did not cross the perceived 'Redline' and India on its part has realised that there is a limit to tolerance as stated by the Raksha Mantri. Pakistan will do well to realise that PM Modi is earnest in improving relations and has invested considerable political capital in reaching out to Nawaz Sharif. It is now up to the dispensation in Pakistan including the army to carry forward the peace process and

control the proxy terrorist, failing which they should be prepared for an appropriate response from India.

To conclude that Pakistan will not perpetuate more terrorist attacks will be a misnomer. India needs to be prepared for such attacks . What India needs is to build capabilities, enhance capacities and demonstrate a politico military will to deter Pakistan by raising the costs of his 'low cost high affect' proxy war. The national security structure will need a synergised approach and a well orchestrated and coordinated response mechanism at the political, diplomatic, economic, informational and military domain.

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