

INDIA MUST DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR COUNTERING PAK

Maj Gen Harsha Kakar(Retd)

Introduction

The strike by militants of JeM on the army's Sanjuwan camp in Jammu over the weekend was the latest in Pak supported strikes on Indian soil. While terror strikes in Kashmir have been routine, launching one in Jammu is a change in trend. A few recent incidents need to be linked together for comprehending the complete picture. The LoC has off late been active, initially it was Kashmir, while presently the focus appears to shift South of the Pir Panjal, with Pak even resorting to the use of anti-tank TOW missiles against Indian defensive positions. In a recent incident an officer and three soldiers were killed and a few injured on subsequent occasions. There are reports that Pak has increased the deployment of its Border Action Team (BAT) Mujahid battalions in the region.

Indian retaliation has remained strong causing greater casualties to Pak. While India reports every casualty, Pak avoids, fearful that its figures would impact the morale of its soldiers and remove the invincible status of its army in the public eye. Its refusal to even share the same with the national leadership is indicative of this fact. In many cases it has refused to acknowledge Indian retaliation, other than lodging protests for targeting civilians. It is in this increased scenario of tensions that the attack on Sanjuwan was launched. Ironically it happened on the heels of the fifth anniversary of the hanging of Afzal Guru, the mastermind of the Parliament attacks, when security forces were on high alert.

Amid the army handling the Sanjuwan attack, there were calls for it to respond with full measure and strike Pak where it

hurts. There were also comments that India only reacts to Pak actions, whereas it should have been taking the initiative and striking harder, making Pakistan pay dearly for every attack on Indian soil. While such bravado is desirable and plays to the galleries, there are deeper designs from Pak which need to be comprehended before considering such suggestions.

There is also the issue of the Indian military's standing in the international environment. India is considered a recognized military power, but actions by Pak have begun denting this image. If India cannot contain Pak's aggressive designs, then its powerful status is likely to be degraded. This would also impact India's diplomatic clout as unless backed by a resolute military, a nation's international voice has less relevance.

Possible Pak Intentions

The internal situation within Pak has clearly shifted in favour of the army. The present beleaguered government, facing pressure from religious and fundamentalist groups in the middle of the election year is in no position to put any road blocks in front of the army. Multiple statements from the government stating that it has reached a compromise with the army is proof of this fact. Thus, talks between the two nations is unlikely for a long time. Further, Pak faces increased pressure from the US on its western borders.

Its Deep State's attempts to bolster militancy in the valley has been receiving setbacks. Its militants are being culled and the Indian army has regained the initiative. Its proxies, the Hurriyat are being slowly marginalized. Hence, the situation in the valley had reached a status quo level, where militancy remains, but is unable to make headway. It had to therefore change its existing strategy.

The first change is the emphasis on shifting its area of interest to South of the Pir Panjal, in the Rajouri-Poonch Sector. Thus, the level of firing in this sector is on the rise.

Similar is increased attempts at infiltration. The region has a very delicate balance of population and Pak's earlier area of interest, Doda has been relatively quiet. It would slowly seek to activate the same. The population residing close to the LoC in this region are Dogra's, hence easy targets.

The next change has been the impact on its army's morale by strong Indian reactions. This needs to be reversed. One option available to it is to increase militancy operations in the region, while enhancing the deployment of BAT battalions. The attack on the Jammu's Sanjuwan camp was to rekindle morale of its army.

The third aspect is to launch such operations which could incite the Indian army to contemplate a cross border strike in a hurry, while it has enhanced its deployment in the region, expecting such an action. It is aware that there would be an increase in internal pressure on the army to counter Pak's actions. The same has begun to emerge in social media and multiple media channels. The opposition has also commenced challenging the government's Kashmir and Pak policy. As state elections draw close and Pak's actions increase, so would political pressure on the government.

For India, a failed cross-border strike could be disastrous. If it is repulsed by Pak or suffers casualties and fails to achieve its objective, then it would boost the morale of the Pak army, while being politically damaging for the government. India would therefore need to assess its options and then consider a suitable response.

Indian Options

India has traditionally been a peace-loving nation. It has never acted unless provoked. Hence, it has largely reacted to Pak's provocations, rarely taking the initiative. Even during Kargil, it fought to regain own territory, without escalation and crossing the border. It is this reactive mode which has given Pak the initiative to choose the time and place to launch militant strikes or violate ceasefires.

India has, out of concern for innocent residents of POK, targeted the Pak army, avoiding collateral damage, unless in retaliation to Pak's actions. This has proved to be an ineffective strategy.

India's international outreach and attempts to isolate Pak has had limited impact. Even the US has stopped its linking of the Taliban and the anti-India terror groups, basically due to their own interests in Afghanistan, giving Pak an opportunity to release Hafiz Saeed. The US, despite increasing drone strikes, has been unable to change Pak's attitude towards terror groups. Chinese support and a desperation to maintain Kashmir as a disputed territory on the international radar has compelled it to increase ceasefire violations and expand militant operations South of the PirPanjal, after a prolonged period of concentrating in the valley.

India would therefore need to recraft its strategy of dealing with Pak, both for the short and long term, to force on it to stop supporting anti-India terror groups. This would imply making the cost of such an action insurmountable to Pak.

The final option is war, but if resorted to, could push Indian economy back. For Pak, already in doldrums, it could signal almost an end of the nation. However, while threat of nuclear weapons would limit the depth of operations, it should always remain an instrument of last resort, when every other policy has failed. Hence would not be a prudent option at this phase.

Short Term Options for India

Militarily India would need to take the initiative and be willing to up the ante along the LoC. It should consider employment of artillery and rocket launchers on Pak posts or even on terror camps within medium artillery or rocket range. Strong punishment on their military should be a short-term measure. Unless it is punished by increased physical

casualties, destruction of posts, repairs of which are not subsequently permitted, it would never change its spots.

Simultaneous should be non-adherence to considering civilian casualties. If Pak can target innocent families in military camps and villages along the LoC, then India should likewise ignore its concern for locals across the border. Increased civilian casualties may have Pak screaming from the rooftops, which India could ignore. It is only by enhancing civilian casualties would their public become aware that India is retaliating hard. Further, within Pak, protests would increase, compelling the army to act, enhancing internal divide, while conveying Indian determination.

Cross-border operations should be rare and only once there are concrete intelligence inputs. It has had limited impact earlier, as Pak denied the same and its nation remained unaware, hence may again have limited and short-term impact, though would assuage Indian morale. Its risk of failure needs to be considered before being launched.

The Pak army is deployed on both fronts, facing increased pressures. TTP, Baluch Freedom fighters and US drone strikes have enhanced pressures on its western border, while India should enhance pressure along the LoC. India has only officially accepted the Baluch Freedom struggle, with the PM applauding them from the ramparts of the Red Fort. It may possibly be time for India to consider even greater support and be vocal on the same.

Increased military exercises along the IB, with enhanced force levels would compel Pak to reconsider its present army deployment. This, if done close to Pak elections, when it is most vulnerable, would enhance pressure on it. The very mention of the 'cold start doctrine' gives it nightmares. It should be compelled to shift deployment away from its western borders, giving anti-Pak groups the space to enhance their operations, adding to internal pressures.

Long Term Options

In the long term, Pak must be bled economically, with India increasing its conventional military might, forcing Pak to resort to the same. The Pak economy is in dire straits and it can presently ill afford to enhance its military spending. Compelling it to do so, would increase internal unrest as basic amenities would be impacted. It is understood that India if compelled to launch military operations, would call the Pak nuclear bluff, a fact known to them. Nuclear weapons cannot be employed unless their national fabric is threatened, which would not be the Indian aim. Hence it would be forced to enhance its conventional capabilities, at the cost of social welfare programs.

Diplomatic pressure, by enhancing ties with its traditional Middle East allies would compel Pak to only bank on China for support. Its main support base of Saudi Arabia and Turkey should be eroded by diplomacy, thus pushing it deeper into isolation. Increasing our ties with Iran, could impact Pak's relations and add to their security concerns. With Afghanistan and the US operating there, India has managed to marginalize Pak, it should seek to do so elsewhere too.

Conclusion

Despite contact between the NSAs continuing, Pak has refused to curb its actions. It has begun expanding its area of infiltration to South of the Valley, which India is strongly resisting. Indian counter-operations have had limited impact. It should realize that it needs to regain the initiative and force Pak to act. If India continues to be bled by Pak, then its standing within the international community would take a beating. The army has the strength and wherewithal to act, hence should strike based on a sound strategy.

Short and long-term goals to isolate and hurt Pak must be identified and the government should work towards it. India must change from reacting to taking the initiative, ignoring collateral damage, making Pak bleed. We are far

more powerful in every way but have been held hostage due to our overtures of peace and desire for de-escalation. It is time to shift gears and move onto the offensive.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.