

Remodelling the National Security Council

By

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The parliamentary committee on external affairs in its report to the government last month, suggested reviving stalled talks with Pakistan. It stated that despite bilateral relations plummeting due to support for terrorism and the treatment meted out to Kulbhushan Jadhav, 'geopolitical realities' make such a process a necessity. The present government has been stating that no dialogue is possible without Pakistan stopping support to terrorism, hence the onus of creating a conducive environment remains with them, on which there are no indicators.

While there have been no official talks, since the Pathankot terror strike, the two NSAs have been meeting at irregular intervals at neutral venues and have also been talking on the phone. The government also fears a political fallout if it accepts any offer for talks, as a terror strike post such acceptance, could lead to a political debacle. The government's apprehensions increased post the ouster of Nawaz Sharif as it was an indicator of the army consolidating its hold on the country. India even ignored the Pak army chief's comments that he is willing to support peace with India.

Chinese aggressiveness is on the rise. Its forays into South Asia, by providing financial

support at high rates of interest, subsequently seeking strategic assets in lieu, is adding to challenges being faced in the immediate neighbourhood. It has also increased incidents of transgressions into Indian territory in recent years. The Doklam standoff proved that India is willing to counter China. The army chief in his interview pre-army day, even stated that though China is a strong country, India is not weak.

In the case of both Pakistan and China as also countering Chinese influence in the immediate neighbourhood, India has no consistent declared national strategy. It continues to lumber on battling threats as they emerge. In both cases it began with peace overtures, but when it did not materialize, India changed tack. It has since then been adopting a calibrated policy against both. While its diplomatic consultations with China continue, it has almost stopped any official interaction with Pak. Thus, while it continues to appease China, it seeks to challenge Pak.

What also needs to be considered is the collusion between the two and the threats it poses. China has always propped up Pak as a challenge to India and compelled India to consider Pak as a major threat. As per reports, it presently provides over 60% of Pak's military hardware. India has majority of its military commands biased towards Pak while even hesitating to develop infrastructure on the Chinese front.

This was because many Indian military leaders still carried the 1962 ghost and defensive mentality towards China and opined that China could exploit this infrastructure, in times of hostilities. It is only recently, that the government has begun shifting focus from the west to the east and commenced enhancing infrastructure development along the Chinese front.

The collusion between China and Pak will also impact Kashmir. As Chinese military, economic and diplomatic support to Pak increases, it would become bolder along the LoC and in attempting disruptions in Kashmir. Further, Chinese investments in POK as part of the OBOR, would seek to provide Pak with a sense of security from Indian intentions.

Internally too, the nation faces a multitude of security threats, however lacks an integrated approach based on a common strategy. Mr NN Vohra, the Governor on J and K, while delivering the 12th RN Kao memorial lecture, suggested a three-pronged approach for refurbishing the internal security mechanism. Firstly, India should promulgate a 'well-considered and holistic' national security policy, which should be implemented with a time-bound action plan. Secondly, there is a need to refurbish the internal security administrative apparatus. He desired the establishment of a national security administrative service. Finally, he suggested the enactment of a new anti-terror law with a more enlarged role, than the NIA.

A national security strategy, as a precursor to a national security policy can only be drafted when all elements of national power are well represented in the main strategy creating institution, the National Security Council (NSC). While it has under its wings the Strategic Policy Group (SPG), Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), the frequency of their meeting and inputs towards developing a national strategy remain unknown. In most cases, strategy appears to evolve through one individual, the National Security Advisor (NSA).

There has never been any doubt on the qualities, experience and capability of the NSA. He also has the complete trust and faith of the Prime Minister and hence the Cabinet Committee on Security, the main national security decision evolving body. However, any strategy to be viable must envelop all elements of national power in complete harmony. Thus, there is an essential need to have senior representatives from the three main elements of power represented in the NSC.

In the present NSC structure, the NSA is the ex-head of the Intelligence Bureau, while his deputy is the former chief of RAW, both being IPS. It does appear that the government's emphasis with this structure is to concentrate on Pakistan and Kashmir. Logically, the top structure of the NSC should be considered for a change, involving the NSA and three deputies,

representing the major elements of national power, finance, diplomatic and defence.

It is a restructured NSC, with the task of producing a national security strategy catering for future threats and the government's approach to them that would open doors for a coordinated 'whole of government' approach. Ignoring other elements of power, in its structure and leadership, would, despite the knowledge and capabilities of the existing leadership, never enable the drawing of a comprehensive strategy.

Thus, the armed forces, which form the backbone of any strategy remain in dark on their role and capability development. The PM of Israel had clearly stated in his address during the Raisina Dialogue, 'The weak don't survive, the strong do. You make peace with the strong, you ally with the strong'.

Strength of a nation flows from a combination of all its elements of power. Unless these are seamlessly coordinated into a common national strategy, there would be pitfalls. This can only happen, when the NSC is restructured to include representatives of the elements on power, employing their specialities to full measure.

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