India's Internal Security:
Lessons from the Pathankot Operation

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When India, one of the oldest civilisations in the world got its freedom on August 15, 1947, just a day prior also saw the birth of a nation called Pakistan in two halves (East and West). The freedom achieved through non-violence was destined to witness senseless mayhem, death and destruction like no other part of the world had witnessed. So the joy of attainment of India's freedom got drowned in the ocean of sorrows, an effect that persists till date, even after over six decades and four wars between the two nations. The relations between the two nations are still at a flashpoint in so far as lasting peace in the world and the Indian subcontinent is concerned.

The 'Pakistan Factor'
Pakistan, in its endless search for identity, appeared to have lost whatever was left of it in 1971, when Bangladesh was created from its eastern wing. Thus, history was rewritten by the Indian Army that handed over the most humiliating defeat to Pakistan since its existence. It could have become an advantage for India, but Pakistan was not willing to let go of it so soon.

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Then in Afghanistan, in the decades of the 1990s, Pakistan was encouraged by its success in pushing out the Russians from the country, with the help of the US supported Taliban. Pakistan prepared a similar blueprint for Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and a proxy war against India, knowing fully well that it stood no chance in a conventional confrontation with its mighty neighbour. Thus, began decades of well-orchestrated trans-border terrorist strikes in India, with a basic focus on J&K. Towards this end, India has displayed a remarkable threshold of tolerance, and not responded to such strikes with hardcore military options but has tried to generate international opinion against the terror networks of Pakistan. Now that this proxy war has gone on for well over two decades by the so-called non-state actors, it is important for India to realise that matters of national security have to be dealt with all by itself, and no nation regardless of how powerful it may be, is capable of providing national security to any other nation.

The only real progress that has been made in India's security calculus since independence has been in terms of border guarding against Pakistan, more so since the Kargil conflict in 1999.We decided to fence our border and stretch it along the Line of Control (LoC), well beyond the International Border (IB). We had undertake similar action in the east on the Bangladesh border, but with limited success. These actions gave us some degree of resolve to ensure that our borders at least did not present a porous barrier. But besides such action, we have not really been able to tighten our internal security mechanisms to assured levels so far.

Internal Security Mechanism

Essentially, there are two core components of an internal security apparatus. Firstly, a host of intelligence agencies that are responsible for providing us the actionable intelligence; and secondly, the executing agencies that have to act on the warning, thus, provided. One has

heard often enough that actionable intelligence was not provided before a terrorist attack and in the same rhythm, one gets a counter from the intelligence agencies that they had, indeed, provided specific information of the impending attack, and thus, the debate carries on. What then should be construed as actionable intelligence? Let us start with a premise that given the size and diversity of our country, it is very difficult to obtain forewarning of an impending terrorist attack. Even if we do get it by default or design, it will probably be some time away from the scene of action to be able to cause any substantial degree of damage to the target area.

So we need to be prepared for all eventualities, and fine-tune the response to any terrorist attack that may take place in the country. This should be the prime focus to start with and once we achieve a certain degree of proficiency in this area, only then should we think of graduating to a higher degree of preparedness to focus our efforts to provide forewarning of the impending strike. While suggesting this, the impression, that these are sequential actions must be avoided, as these are simultaneous developments, on parallel tracks. In the case of the Pathankot incident, real time information was available yet the executing agencies failed to either prevent or conduct a surgical strike, with minimum damage to own self. So, indeed, there are many chinks in India's armour regarding internal security, as have been cited below.

Guarding the Borders: The start point should be the international borders from where terrorists always manage to get across into India's territory. While the Border Security Force (BSF) is responsible for the IB sector, it is a combined effort with the Army in the case of the LoC. Either way, the border guarding of the IB sector as a responsibility comes under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) under which also comes a plethora of intelligence agencies. All the other activities in the hinterland too, are under the MHA. Therefore, no one else needs to be held responsible for the action up to the availability of information.

Actionable Intelligence: Any/all information processing and dissemination is a function of its credibility and reliability parameters that need to be analysed with complete situational awareness by the professionals to term it as actionable intelligence. The crunch of the issue here is that we lack analytical abilities in a quick timeframe because of many factors, prime amongst them being the non-seamless functioning of the various agencies involved in collection, analysis and dissemination of the raw information as an intelligence input to our executing agencies.

Analytical Abilities: With the ongoing information overload, it is just not possible to analyse all the available data with the traditional methods. Besides having a large data bank of compiled information, we need software-based data analysis systems to generate human-assisted actionable intelligence on a daily basis.

Dissemination of Intelligence: The next step would then be to disseminate this actionable intelligence to the executing agencies. In the case of Pathankot, we had the BSF, Punjab Police, Air Force and Army that formed a chain of the executing agencies, not to mention the National Security Guard (NSG) and civil administration functioning in that area, one way or the other. When translated at a higher level, the issue gets even more complicated with the MHA, Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Punjab government being sandwiched between them. It was bound to be a recipe for disaster, waiting to happen, and it did. The simplest thing would have been to inform the local commander, in this case the Army formation close by, under whose jurisdiction the entire area falls and, a routine operational action would have easily eliminated all the terrorists involved. The Army, in any case, is so adept at these actions, as it has to frequently undertake them against the terrorists in J&K.

Gurdaspur and Pathankot Terror Strikes: Lessons Learnt

Following the Mumbai attacks, many measures and actions were announced, to be undertaken for future contingencies. However,

India needed another one to be reminded to awaken from its slumber. Not one, but two, came in the form of Gurdaspur and Pathankot, one after the other. Immediately after the incident, there was a flood of articles, with reasons and themes at a tangent to say the least. Many agencies were roped in for the Pathankot operation. Nobody had any idea of who was functioning under whom, and reporting to whom. So it was a free for all, till India lost seven soldiers (from the Defence Security Corps, National Security Guard, and an Air Force Garud commando). Finally, an Army formation was called in to eliminate all the six terrorists. Doubts still persist about the total number of terrorists involved in these attacks.

Single-Point Command and Control: One important lesson that needs to be learnt is the nomination of one single agency that is responsible in such situations and under which should come all the others involved in the operation to eliminate the terrorists involved in the strike. A single-point command and control is the basic principle for success in all such operations.

Selection of Suitable Agency: Selection of the right agency that is best suited for the task is the most critical requirement. After the Kargil debacle, the Group of Ministers (GOM) had approved the principle of 'one border one force' for border guarding tasks. Border guarding is a specialised job. The MHA has a uniformed force of nearly one million called the Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) that is responsible for border guarding and an additional police force (Central Reserve Police Force—CRPF) for central intervention in the states on an as required basis (as an add-on to the state police). It includes the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) for airports and industrial security. It has been found that more often than not, these forces are used in an ad hoc manner, as per their availability and not as per their specialisation. Amongst all these forces, the National Security Guard (NSG) is the most elite and potent force that must be used for critical situations that fully exploit

its specialisation and vast potential. Ill-suited deployment and under-utilisation will not only kill this force but show it in a poor light as well.

Seamless Connectivity and Communication Channels: Availability of actionable intelligence apart, there is a major shortfall in terms of a dedicated communication and data network, which will be able to synergise India's security umbrella in the shortest possible timeframe. In fact, despite a long felt need, somehow we have not been able to meet this very basic requirement as yet. In today's environment India's internal security dynamics cannot be taken care of by makeshift communication arrangements. There are too many mental blocks to be cleared even amongst the various functionaries of the large number of intelligence agencies as also executing agencies that we have, to be able to exploit all the available resources towards a common goal.

Operational Strike Elements: It is appreciated that the western borders are our biggest vulnerability and so are the border states. So in phase one of the Indian priorities, besides strengthening zero infiltration border management with the latest technology as the backbone, the internal security needs a dedicated single-point high-level contact, since the states, the intelligence agencies, including the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and the issues of border management all come under the MHA. There is no debate on the issue of the internal security mechanism being under the MHA. But the moot point is their connectivity and locations across the length and breadth of the country for the required quick reaction time which is of prime importance to neutralise such threats.

MHA-MoD Connect: It has been seen that, by and large, it is the Army that is finally called in for operating against the terrorists, despite a plethora of other strike elements that keep flexing their muscles during peace-time, as has also been the case in the Pathankot incident. Here lies a disconnect again which is most detrimental to our reaction capabilities against such strikes. Therefore, there is also a

need to connect the MoD into the internal security dynamics basically for two prime reasons: firstly, this will enable the entire resources of the armed forces to act quickly at the point of crisis; and secondly, the all-India presence which the Army possesses, will help shorten the reaction time to the barest minimum.

Command and Control – Joint Operations Room: Perhaps, the most important issue that now needs to be taken care of is that of command and control of all elements in the internal security mechanism which have to operate in unison. It should rightfully be under the MoD till such time the CAPF acquires the desired level of capabilities and expertise to handle such situations on its own, leaving the Army to take care of its primary responsibilities of dealing with external aggressions and threats. So far, this author has never been privy to a fully-functional operations room anywhere in the country, which is operating 24x7, all 365 days in a year, except the Military Operations (MO) Ops Room in South Block. Therefore, it is recommended that there should a makeshift joint Ops Room, and, simultaneously, efforts are required to be made to establish a similar Ops Room in the MHA, wherein the nuances of all military Ops Rooms are then taken over by the CAPF. It is time that the burden of internal security is taken over from the Army by the almost matching numbers of CAPF personnel that the MHA already has. The Army has always been forthcoming to share and provide the requisite training and support to these forces for as long as they want, and until they get fully empowered to operate independently on their own.
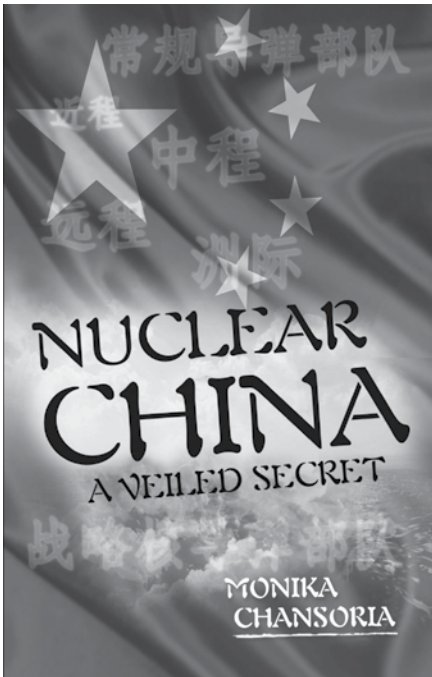
A Roadmap for the Future

We should stop looking at any outside intervention to tell Pakistan to stop its terrorist actions against India. India should continue building a case for it under the Global War on Terrorism. We need to be fully convinced that, be it external or internal security of the nation, it cannot

be outsourced. Therefore, it is entirely our concern and our battle, and it is a requisite to build enough accountability. In the light of whatever has been discussed so far, let me put down the measures that need to be undertaken on priority to strengthen India's internal security mechanism to avoid an incident like Pathankot.

- Effective manning of the IB and the LoC with full exploitation of all available technologies, so as to achieve zero levels of infiltration.
- Integration of all internal intelligence agencies, including those of the states, wherein national security must override parochial considerations, for their maximum exploitation.
- Development of human intelligence must also have due priority alongside the present-day electronic intelligence.
- Seamless communication and data connectivity of all agencies connected to internal security, regardless of the ministries under which they are placed.
- Major overhaul and modernisation of the analytical capabilities of the Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) on the lines of the MO Ops Room of the Army. This should be the Joint Integrated Command and Control Centre (JICCC) under the MHA, and the nerve centre for all anti-terrorists operations in the country, except J&K and the northeast [which come under the purview of the AFSPA—Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act].
- Integration and activation of a National Security Grid consisting of Quick Reaction Forces (QRFs) as per their geographical locations. Initially, these forces could be a mix of the Army, NSG and CAPF, depending upon their locations, but, over a period of time, these could be entirely from the MHA, for best accountability, reaction and command and control.

Finally, no matter how well thought out and think through processes India develops for internal security, the non-state actors' survival depends

upon innovations that they would keep coming up with to beat the security apparatus of the state. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that we too, keep evaluating and upgrading our systems based on the lessons learnt following a terrorist strike, in order to maintain superiority over the terrorists' *modus operandi*. It is said that a plan is only as good as it works – implying that India needs to carefully execute what is best for its security dynamics. It appears very clearly that this is going to be the future of warfare, so the conclusion cannot be left open-ended. We already have all the ingredients of security available to us—they just require to be connected and fine-tuned for greater effectiveness. Finally, India's internal security must be upgraded to citizenship levels, wherein every individual is part of our national security system and the security consciousness of the nation. It is time for graduating from the concept of a need to know, to that of the need to tell.

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