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Failing on Terror Yet Again

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Hyderabad is bloodied again by terrorism, exposing once more our failure to marshal the political will, the legal instruments, the organs and the required technical skills and manpower resources to combat this grave threat to the nation.

Admittedly, combating terrorism is extraordinarily difficult because a few individuals armed with rage, rudimentary bomb making technology and ordinary means of "delivery" like tiffin boxes and bicycles can cause mayhem in crowded localities in our overpopulated and disorganized cities.

More importantly, terrorism has a vast international dimension outside not only India's control but also of countries more powerful and determined to fight terrorism than us. At its centre is the sense of grievance nourished in Islamic circles against the enemies of Islam whose legitimacy accorded by religious texts as interpreted by them to the act of killing innocent people haphazardly as redressal.

Contrast

While it would be unrealistic to expect the government to provide total protection to the public against any possible terrorist attack, it is legitimate to expect credible and comprehensive steps to secure their lives against such deadly violence, without being necessarily able to achieve success in this regard. The US is oceans away from the epicenter of terror; its neighbours cooperate fully to shield North America from terrorism, drawing its frontline against terrorism thousands of miles away from its shores the US has given itself vast protective geographical depth.

India has no such cushions. Our neighbour has used terrorism as a weapon against us for almost 30 years now. Having long judged that Pakistan can fine tune the timing, periodicity and degree of its provocations to suit its political needs. It knows that deniability is important for doubt about its culpability so that an immediate Indian riposte is deflected and the risk of being declared a terrorist state is avoided. It has raised jihadi groups to attack India, whose violence is then politically justified as being driven by the unresolved Kashmir question. As its network of terrorist links grows, Pakistan has also outsourced terrorism to extremist groups in India by mobilizing them through pan-Islamic rhetoric and back of local grievances.

Pakistan also has a class of politicians, diplomats and members of civil society that come across as educated, modern, articulate and sophisticated. They counter with finesse accusations that it is promoting terrorism. The rise of domestic terrorism, although an offshoot of the complicity of Pakistan with jihadi groups, gives them an added argument to deny Pakistan's terrorist affiliations.

Additionally, the rampant belief in conspiracy theories in Pakistan about the West, Israel and India conniving at slandering Islam and victimhood, precluding self-introspection about its own failings as a society. In this narrative, Islam is the embodiment of peace and justice and alien to it. If Islamic groups commit acts of terrorism, it is because of manipulation by hidden hands. The other defence is that either they are not true Muslims, or that the entire community should not be tarnished because of the misdeeds of a few with no proper understanding of Islam. This explains the widespread belief that the 9/11 attacks against America was a Jewish conspiracy. The remarks in Delhi by Pakistan's interior minister that an external hand behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks is part of this syndrome.

Pakistan

Iran and North Korea are castigated for terrorism, as was Libya earlier, even if what is attributed to them has no parallel in scale and involvement with such activity. Pakistan is spared the same ignominy because its relationship with the West is not one of unalloyed hostility. Its compliance with western demands, even on terrorism, is both compliant and defiant. In any case, a non-Nato US ally, receiving substantial American military assistance and geopolitically vital for extricating the US from Afghanistan, can hardly be declared a terrorist state. This western approach to Pakistan severely limits the extent to which India can bilaterally and multilaterally make Pakistan more accountable for its terrorist misdeeds. Pakistan makes the problem even more complex to handle.

India's democratic system, its openness, its internal watchdogs such as the independent judiciary and the press, the accountability of the executive, the force in the hands of the executive in a constitutional system, do not allow India to use the instrument of terrorism against Pakistan as a

Mistakes

While all these difficulties and handicaps are understandable, what is not is the absence of a coherent national strategy to combat repeated assaults. We have made matters worse for ourselves by diluting the centrality of terrorism in our dialogue with Pakistan; Pakistan the status of a terrorism stricken state just like us; we have lowered the heat on Pakistan by conceding the amplitude of our grown terrorism; we have weakened our position by equating a few isolated terrorist attacks by Hindus with scores of such attacks on jihadi groups; further harm has been done by the Home Minister accusing the main opposition party of training Hindu terrorists; we terrorism issue for electoral reasons so much that any corrective action will be interpreted with political bias; the disproportionate sympathy of our intelligentsia for Afzal Guru shows the soft belly of any potential resolve to combat terrorism without quarter.

No wonder that all we can do when a terrorist attack occurs is to call it “dastardly” and vow that the “perpetrators” will not go unpunished. The same clichés when innocent Indian citizens are bloodied again by jihadi groups.

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