



Military Action in Myanmar: Managing the Message

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The Special Forces operation in Myanmar against insurgent camps is being widely perceived as a possible new template to deny safe haven to terrorists. The message appears to be that if terrorists launch attacks inside India from bases outside India, then these are legitimate targets for Indian special forces. Although this was not the first military operation carried out along the India-Myanmar border against insurgents, all previous operations were conducted in conjunction, cooperation and coordination with the Myanmar Army. What was qualitatively different this time was that India acted unilaterally around the same time that the operation was being carried out. It was almost as though Myanmar was confronted with a fait accompli. This is a template that the Americans have used when they made clear that if they had actionable intelligence about a high value target inside Pakistan, they would take him out without bothering about diplomatic niceties.

Of course, Pakistan is no Myanmar. While Pakistan has for long actively supported and promoted terrorism across its borders and was a safe haven for Islamist terror groups functioning from territory under Pakistan's control, Myanmar has never been involved in such malevolence. Quite the opposite, Myanmar has always tried to lend whatever cooperation was possible to India in combating terrorism and insurgency, so much so that India and Myanmar conducted joint operations against terror groups. If, therefore, the Myanmar authorities were taken in the loop at the last minute, it was for reasons of operational secrecy and urgency, or to avoid confronting Myanmar with a dilemma – they have their own ceasefire with the Kachin which could be jeopardized if they were to openly cooperate with India against this group. Whatever the reason, the end result has been to send out a clear message that it will henceforth reserve the right to unilaterally exercise the option of attacking the attackers beyond its borders. Perhaps, if the operation hadn't been blown up to the extent it has, Myanmar would have brushed it under the carpet and wouldn't have issued somewhat contradictory statements about its position on the Indian SF operation. That Myanmar was constrained to issue statements for the Indian government and political establishment on the perception and information management of such operations.

Cross-border operations, whether unilateral or bilateral, and whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, involve national sensitivities and have repercussions that cannot be ignored. What is critical is managing the information flow – who will say what and to whom – and keeping the operation secret. Information about the operation. The tendency among Indian officials and politicians to come on TV and make loose statements needs to be controlled. Nobody in a position of responsibility who is not authorised to comment on such issues should be allowed to make unauthorised and uncontrolled leaks which then not only create confusion about what exactly happened but also send out mixed signals. There should be a script that all people should stick to and any spin around the story should be around this script.

To be fair to the government, the problem this time wasn't so much that people authorised to speak spoke out of turn. In fact, they stuck to the Army's statement which was succinct and adequately ambiguous on the details of the operation, which left enough wriggle room for deniability in the message. Even the statement by the Minister of State for Information was more or less around the script and it was delivered in a professional manner. The furore over Mr Rajyavardhan Rathore's statement, especially the oblique reference to Pakistan, was somewhat misplaced. As an official or army man, if asked if a Myanmar type operation can be carried out against the 'motherland of terrorism' – Pakistan – will ever be done. To say this will amount to encouraging the Pakistanis to continue with their export of Jihadist terror into India with impunity. But the minister, without singling out Pakistan, he said that the government will respond to any cross-border attack regardless of where it came from.

The subsequent media frenzy and the verbal duels – within India and between India and Pakistan – were partly the result of the minister's statement of context and partly the function of the nature of the beast which is 24x7 media – both the on-air and the online variety – which tends to give the SF operation a life of its own. This new news trajectory is something unavoidable in this day and age but it still needs to be in question on whether the new template includes operations in Pakistan was legitimate, even natural, and the answer given unexceptional reaction was expectedly hysterical and suffused with typical Punjabi boastfulness.

If Pakistan wasn't suffering from mens rea over its involvement in cross-border terrorism, it could have easily ignored the minister's remarks. Other neighbours of India, including China. While India and China have their share of problems, neither side is using 'non-state actors' in Pakistan, to solve these problems. What is more, it's silly for the usual suspects who revel in being detractors of India to ask whether India should act in the US-like manner against China. The simple answer is can the US do in China what it does in Pakistan? In any case, if China doesn't stop supporting terrorism in India or hosts training camps of terrorists in its territory, why should India want to carry out such operations in China? Or for that matter, Bangladesh or any other neighbour. Pakistan's problem, as is manifest from their hysterical reaction to the possibility of India undertaking such operations, is that it is a state actor.

against terror infrastructure in that country, is that they have come to believe that they have some sort of divine right to export terror impunity. To an extent, the failure of countries like India, USA, Iran and Afghanistan to hit back has emboldened Pakistan to think it murder. But that may just not happen anymore, if the new Indian security template that is now being forged is anything to go by. The instrument will be used against which adversary will depend on the situation, the circumstances, the intelligence and the effectiveness when weighed against the objective.

As things stand, the government has exhibited its resolve and its intent on retaliating against terror groups. The Myanmar operation decimating the terror networks in one fell swoop. Nor is it important whether two or twenty terrorists were killed. What was important has been delivered loud and clear. Of course, this message brings with it its own problems, not the least of which is the public expectation of immediate retaliation and the political, diplomatic and strategic risks these will bring to bear on the government. It is important to understand now to keep mounting such operations because one operation isn't enough to break the back of all insurgents. If anything, they will re-protect themselves against similar operations in the future. What is more, not all operations will be as successful as the Myanmar operations which will be disasters. But mature nations neither go in raptures over a successful operation, nor slip into depression when an operation goes bad. There has to be national stoicism and resolve to fight terrorism and if the government has indeed forged a new template for border terror, then it must prepare the country to celebrate successes and handle failures. Equally important, while the government of India for every successful operation, it will also have to accept responsibility for whenever an operation fails and there are casualties. It is not to indulge in political chest thumping and politicise successes because then the political cost of any failure will be just as high. Most actions in interest of national security will break the political consensus around them, and this is best avoided.

Finally, every cross-border operation is different. There are some which are acknowledged and accepted because they are delivering a result, others which are unacknowledged even though everyone knows they have been carried out. And finally there are operations which are full of media and the political establishment to indulge in grand-standing on each and every operation is something that will compromise both national interest. Breaking news is always tempting but is sometimes extremely damaging. And it's precisely for this reason that governments handle over how it controls flow of information, plugs the leaks and spins the story.

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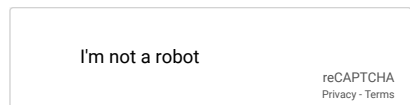
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