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Operational doctrine needed to defeat proxy war

A national strategy must be formulated so as to make it cost-prohibitive for Islamabad to continue with the misadventure.

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Mindset: India must stop perceiving Pakistan-sponsored attacks as just cross-border terrorism. PTI



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SINCE April this year, there has been a spike in terror attacks in the Jammu region. In reference to these encounters, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) DGP RR Swain said, “A war has been imposed upon us but every terrorist in J&K will be killed.” However, this war has now gone on unabated for over three decades, orchestrated by Pakistan as part of its national doctrine. India has been dealing with this menace as state-sponsored terrorism from across the border.

It was in the early 1980s that Pakistan began to fuel militancy in Punjab to bleed India, having successively failed in conventional wars. The Pakistan army arranged a safe haven for the militants, providing training, arms and financial support. The decade-long militancy was ultimately defeated due to extensive coordinated operations by the security forces, coupled with a favourable groundswell. Victory came at a heavy price, both by way of bloodshed and in financial terms. Punjab was devastated and is yet to fully recover.

Given the success in Punjab, the Pakistan military top brass was convinced that its sacred mission to wrest Kashmir could be achieved through 'non-state actors'. The success of jihadis in defeating a superpower in Afghanistan reinforced the belief. Accordingly, Pakistan's 'Deep State' launched the proxy war in J&K in 1989-90, contemplating a local uprising, an exodus of minorities, rendering the civil apparatus defunct and defeating the security forces through irregular warfare.

Though terrorists initially gained the upper hand, by the mid-1990s, the Indian Army was able to stabilise the situation. While normalcy was a far cry, the danger of the Kashmir valley slipping away had been averted. In the initial stages, the foreign outfits — mainly Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) — were the mainstay of the proxy war, the Valley being the main focus. Even around early 2000, when I was commanding a formation in the Valley, foreign terrorists had a viable presence in Baramulla and south Kashmir.

In September 1998, although India and Pakistan agreed to hold a composite dialogue which included issues such as terrorism and narcotics, Gen Pervez Musharraf, the then Chief of Army Staff, had different plans. Pakistan continued to use the jihadi groups to undertake calibrated operations, often changing the modus operandi. India's response remained largely defensive, with no concrete measures to target terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan. A nexus between local politicians, terrorists and Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) remained intact.

Following the 'Ceasefire Agreement' (CFA) on the Line of Control (LoC) in 2003, it became easier for Pakistani handlers to infiltrate terrorists into J&K. There was also a shift in Pakistan's strategy to lend a local touch to the proxy war by involving groups like the Hizbul Mujahideen. Given its nuclear capability, Pakistan has succeeded in

significantly constraining India's conventional options. The Pakistan perception was reinforced during the 1999 Kargil conflict as India's response was rather measured.

India's approach to cross-border terrorism remained reactive, marked by restraint, although public opinion was often for strong military action against Pakistan, especially after the terror attacks at Parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008. The Pakistan army has been able to regulate the proxy war and keep the Indian security forces engaged while imposing substantial costs, knowing that India lacks effective deterrence. The Pakistan assumption did get challenged when India undertook surgical strikes across the LoC in 2016 and the air strike at Balakot in 2019. Thereon, Pakistan's approach has been to avoid major actions so as to obviate retaliation.

With the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 and reorganising of J&K into two union territories, the situation in the Valley has shown a marked improvement. Consequently, Pakistan changed its strategy by shifting the operations from the Kashmir valley to the south of the Pir Panjal — the Jammu region — after almost two decades. Over the last three years, the Rajouri-Poonch region has witnessed a series of terror strikes, with the security forces suffering significant losses. The recent incidents in Reasi, Doda, Kulgam and Kathua are the handiwork of the LeT and JeM, with the Resistance Force and Kashmir Tigers being the respective front faces of these outfits. The continued proxy war underscores the fragility of the situation in the region.

For Pakistan, the proxy war against India is a lucrative option. It offers high returns at a minimal cost. Rawalpindi has shown flexibility to exploit vulnerabilities across the Indian borders and the hinterland. Hence, India must accept this reality and shed the notion of perceiving it to be just cross-border terrorism. Further, it must stop dealing with the situation in piecemeal binaries — North-South of the Pir Panjal and LoC-IB sectors — as also the notion that the Pakistani designs can be defeated by reactive tactical operations.

It is imperative for India's security planners to formulate a national strategy encompassing politico-diplomatic-economic measures to make it cost-prohibitive for Islamabad to continue with the misadventure. The collusion between Pakistan and China needs to be factored in as the latter is now a stakeholder in the game. Alongside, there is an immediate requirement to formulate an integrated 'counter-proxy war doctrine', which should be multi-dimensional, encompassing operations

across the LoC to destroy terrorists' launch pads and target Pakistani posts assisting infiltration at the LoC, to create a conducive environment and favourable ecosystem. The CFA needs to be abrogated as it provides immunity to the Pakistan army against punitive actions by the Indian security forces.

In J&K, since 1990, around 6,480 security personnel have lost their lives and about 38,720 civilians have been killed (including an unspecified number of terrorists). Evidently, India has paid a heavy price. It is time to replace the existing format with a prudent strategy and operational doctrine to defeat the Pakistan-sponsored proxy war. Else, we are destined to continue to suffer the fait accompli.