The end of diffidence: India has moved from restrained to robust deterrence of terror. Can it sustain this shift?

By Arjun Subramaniam, March 19, 2019

For decades, the Indian military has been talking about ‘hot pursuit’ and the necessity of a declaratory punitive policy in response to terrorist attacks attributable to cross-border terrorism aided and abetted by the Pakistani deep state. From the 1990s onwards India’s responses to terrorist attacks, hijackings and bombings have generally been reactive, diffident and restrained.

Successive Indian governments have baulked at breaching a deterrence and response barrier, apprehensive that Indian aspirations of being seen by the rest of the world as a ‘responsible and restrained power’ would take a beating. Some, of course, would tag India’s responses as that of a ‘soft state.’

Diplomacy and futile back-channel negotiations based on cultural affinity and close societal linkages sparked an unsustainable belief within governments and intelligentsia that it was possible to manoeuvre around the military-jihadi complex and resolve the closely inter-twined issues of Jammu & Kashmir and cross-border terrorism. This approach emboldened Pakistan-based jihadi networks like LeT and JeM and allowed them to proliferate and grow into powerful entities and strategic assets of Pakistan’s deep state.

The constituencies that have suffered the maximum because of this strategic diffidence have been those that ‘ask no questions’ and rise to the call of duty – India’s armed forces, its paramilitary forces and J&K/Punjab Police. Taking casualties in a limited but costly high-altitude ‘victory’ that could have been directed and fought better (Kargil), in counter-infiltration, counter-insurgency or counter-terrorist operations is something that only we Indians accept fatalistically. Civilians have suffered too as collateral – their anguish reverberates, but has rarely resulted in action. It appeared to many discerning Western observers that human life in India was cheap.
It is in this strategic milieu and widespread domestic angst that one needs to distance oneself from all the rhetoric about the physical impact of the Balakot strikes and the one-on-one scorecard following the aerial engagement over Naushera. Similarly, it is important to hear international criticism about lack of transparency, but not necessarily listen to it. It is outcomes that one ought to be looking at.

So far, the signals that seem to be emerging from the Modi government are – “we know, we are trying, and will continue on the path we have embarked on and are prepared for the consequences.” This is where India’s mask of restrained deterrence it has worn for decades may have come off. In its place has emerged what I would term ‘proactive and preemptive deterrence’. Notwithstanding the muscular rhetoric that is not hard to understand during an election year in a chaotic and raucous democracy, the strategic restraint and responsibility have merely been complemented with a third ‘R’ and that is resolve.

Christine Fair argues in a recent interview that in the current situation, India has not displayed the requisite capability to back its demonstrated intent just because it has not declassified conclusive proof of the damage caused to the Balakot JeM training centre. While there is an element of truth that the Indian strategic establishment has not managed the narrative at the same tempo as the military operation, there is also a push-back that India does not need to unveil proof of damage and casualties and prove to the world that it ‘has arrived on the global stage’ in terms of ‘full spectrum’ military capability. It reckons that in the fog of a near-warlike situation, there are enough pointers to an effective strike like a taped conversation that had Masood Azhar’s brother confirm that the JeM training camp was attacked by an Indian aerial attack and the refusal of the Pakistan military to offer access to the site of the attack.

Here is my take. The punitive strikes along the Myanmar border against the NSCN(K) in June 2015 was the first calibrated step on the part of PM Modi’s national security team in testing the deterrence and escalation ladder. It allowed Indian special forces to gain self-belief in their already-proven capabilities and went one step further in 2016 by testing the response of an irrational adversary during a series of shallow cross-border strikes against terrorist camps/ shelters/ staging areas.

Notwithstanding that such operations have also been conducted earlier, the present set of well-executed tactical operations have had a positive impact on the morale of India’s armed forces like rarely before. They have demonstrated improved short-of-war military capabilities and allowed
the government to explore ‘harder options’ when intended outcomes were not forthcoming.

The IAF strike at Balakot was a result of this exploratory process. When coupled with its ferocious air defence response two days later to a powerful PAF package, accusations of lack of transparency and gaps in capability pale in front of the achievement.

Can India evolve its own brand of robust deterrence in the months ahead? Will PM Modi’s government follow through with their articulated posture that ‘this will be the new normal’? Will Pakistan’s deep state engage with its society and arrive at a sane conclusion that waging a covert war against India hurts its own society more than that of its adversary? These are questions now that trouble over a billion Indians and Pakistanis. Is it not time to reflect?