

COUNTER-INSURGENCY IN KASHMIR – THE HARD OPTIONS

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Considering the secessionist cause for which the militants in Kashmir are fighting and the magnitude of the resistance that they are offering, even if with the help of Pakistan, there can be no doubt that what the Government is faced with in Kashmir is insurgency in its acutest form. The situation cannot, therefore, be tackled with ad-hoc and half hearted measures but only by conducting a regular counter-insurgency operation with both its military and political components acting harmoniously. The Government action in Kashmir must therefore be viewed in this light. At present it would appear that while the military aspect has been taken well care of, the political side is faltering.

Counter-insurgency, though essentially a military operation, is certainly not an operation of war. Never-the-less it demands, for its successful conduct, the involvement and cooperation of the nation as a whole to even a greater extent than does an open war. After all in counter-insurgency operations the government is engaged in fighting with a recalcitrant section of its own people, and though fight it must in the interest of national security and territorial integrity, it remains answerable to its people for undue sufferings that these operations may cause to the innocent. As a matter of fact, unlike in an open war, all actions of the government connected with counter-insurgency remain open to discussion and criticism by its people, and as in a democracy the survival of the government depends on the support of the people, it cannot afford to ignore public opinion even when such opinion goes against the basic tenets of counter-insurgency. It follows that any public opinion which results from ignorance of the intricacies and implications of counter-insurgency operations could, by exercising the wrong type of pressure on the government inadvertently damage the national cause. If nothing else it could make the government to unnecessarily hesitate in its actions against the insurgents, which would only prolong the nation's ordeal of fighting its own people. A knowledgeable public, that appreciates the difficulties of the government in having to choose between its hard options, and continues to provide the moral support that it needs is, perhaps, as important in the successful conduct of counter-insurgency operations as the security forces themselves.

Discussed below are some of the points related to counter-insurgency which need to be appreciated by the people in general so that no unintentional hindrance is caused to the government while it is carrying out its most unpleasant but obligatory task in Kashmir.

Insurgency generally starts only when the government, after due consideration of the demands of the militants, determines that these demands cannot be met without detriment to the national cause. That is when the negotiation stage has passed and the militants have decided to achieve through force of arms what the government would not give through negotiations. Any initiative on the part of the government to revive dialogue with the insurgents after they have taken up arms against it would naturally be taken as a sign of weakness and is bound to prove counter-productive. For this would generate hope among the insurgents, boost their morale, and induce them to continue their fight rather than end it. At the start of insurgency, the normal action of the government should, therefore, be to pend all talks and give strong indications to the insurgents, through word and deed, that it means business and intends to deal with them firmly with all the resources at its disposal. Only when the first round has been successfully fought by the government and the insurgents convinced of the futility of an armed struggle that any feeler for talks may be sent to them.

It would appear that in relation to the handling of the situation in Kashmir, the Congress Government at the Centre pursued a weak-kneed and ostrich-like policy which made the attainment of the goal by the insurgent look so simple to the people that thousands hastened to flock to their support, in the belief that they were joining the winning side. The new Janata Dal Government also showed noticeable signs of hesitancy and even panic in the initial stages of its taking over the situation. But mercifully, (and thanks to the continued moral support from the BJP, and the appreciable change in the stance of the left parties), the position today is quite different, with the Government having conveyed to the insurgents in no mistakable terms that it intends to stamp out insurgency, no matter what the cost. It is, however, to be seen if it will be able to persevere in its efforts even if it takes longer to subdue the rebels than the time it expects to do it in at present.

No insurgency - however appealing its cause - can last more than a few weeks against the government's onslaught unless it continues to receive material and moral support from a foreign power that is in a position to support the insurgents. It follows, therefore, that among the first steps in dealing with insurgency must be included the sealing of the borders and cutting off the channels of communication between the insurgents and the foreign power that is assisting them by way of arms, ammunition, training, and incitement to keep the insurgency going. It must, however, be remembered that the sealing of the border is easier said than done notwithstanding the number of occasions on which various governments may have claimed to have successfully achieved this. Even after all efforts have been made to seal the border, therefore, there may still be a requirement for sending out an equally clear and strong indication to the concerned foreign power that its conduct in abetting and inciting insurgency and providing it with material support would not be tolerated even if it means going to war on this account. The use of the threat of war is a recognised method of diplomacy but it can be effective only if it is real and adequately backed by military strength and not just an empty one. The effectiveness of the threat of war will, in fact, depend on the extent to which the balance of power is tilted in favour of the country making the threat and also on the quality of its political leadership. In the context of the Indian Prime Minister's threat of war to Pakistan, while the genuineness of the threat is reflected in the personality of Mr VP Singh the side towards which the balance of power is tilted is more or less an open secret.

Considering that the bulk of India's armed forces is tied up on its border with China, India is not in a position to win a decisive victory against Pakistan, but it still stands a good chance of achieving success necessary for meeting its limited counter-insurgency requirements. India's requirement is not necessarily that of destruction of the bases of insurgents deep in Pakistan territory but only, perhaps, to be able to make a few humbling thrusts into Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and Pakistan proper to lower its prestige in the eyes of the Kashmiri insurgents. India seems to be in a fairly happy position to accomplish this limited aim. Moreover Pakistan is not likely to take the grave risk of a war with India for the sake of the Kashmiri insurgents, most of whom have a declared objective of independence rather than joining Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan may have realised that the insurgents are wanting to use Pakistan against India just as, they claim, that their ancestors used India against Pakistan in 1947. So unless Pakistan miscalculates as it did in 1965 and 1971, India's threat is likely to have the desired effect. Not that Pakistan is likely to completely dissociate itself from the cause of the insurgents but that it will deter it from supporting them openly. The necessity for India to go to war with Pakistan will depend on how effectively it is able to seal the border otherwise to cut off the insurgents' links with Pakistan. Judging from the results achieved in terms of arrests made and

weapons captured along the Indo-Pak border, the Indian security forces seem to have been fairly successful in checking the movement of the Kashmiri insurgents to and fro Pakistan. Whether India will go to war with Pakistan over the issue of Kashmir insurgency will also depend on the extent to which it will be able to resist the pressure of the Super Powers to the contrary.

The hardest task in counter-insurgency remains to that of hunting out insurgents from thickly populated areas. This is so because of certain handicaps under which the security forces are required to fight. The biggest handicap is the difficulty of distinguishing the friend from the foe, before the foe actually strikes. The insurgent therefore, retains the initiative by being able to choose his targets and also the time and place of strike. Consequently he acts while the security forces react and reaction can never match action. The other handicap results from the contradictory nature of the requirements of counter-insurgency. For the success of operations strong measures against the insurgents become necessary but with the insurgents operating from densely populated areas, strong measures against them are bound to cause sufferings, hardships, and casualties to the general public. This, besides inviting the wrath of the people against the government or its "accesses could arouse such feelings of sympathy for the insurgents as are bound to exist between co-sufferers, which is exactly what the security forces are required to prevent.

While insurgency thrives on propaganda, success of counter-insurgency operations depends on counter-propaganda. To be effective counter-propaganda must aim at, one, weaning away public support from the insurgents directly in the area of operations, and, two, preventing demoralisation and a sense of despondency that terrorist activity is likely to create among the people of the country in general. The will of the Nation to fight insurgency to the finish, however long the struggle and whatever the suffering and sacrifices in lives required, is of vital importance for the successful conclusion of counter-insurgency. Little seems to be done by the government in this direction. How else could it be explained that today one bomb blast or an odd killing by the terrorist is able to do more damage to the morale of the people than what a most successful police action is able to build. Or how is it that the government gets the blame for the dastardly acts committed by the terrorists. If insurgency is to be defeated and Kashmir remained as a part of India, the people must be prepared to face death as stoically as does the insurgent who is trying to separate it. Though a sad reflection on human nature it is a fact that there has been no period in the history of the world when innocent people have not got killed for one reason or the other. The fighting in Kashmir is not of our making unless surrender to the terrorist is made a virtue. There is no example in the world where insurgency has been contained without hurting the insurgents and their sympathisers. Those who feel the prick of conscience on having to fight our own people could, perhaps, derive consolation from the Mahabharata.