

## To meet the Taliban Threat

### INDIA MUST GROW MILITARILY

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Even without lending credence to the rumours about Taliban having already entered J&K or appearing to sound alarmist, it could, perhaps, be said with a fair amount of certainty that the day is not too far off when India would actually be faced with a serious threat to its security from this ever increasing tribe of die hard religious fanatics. The way the political situation is developing in Pakistan, with Pakistan going slowly but surely under Taliban control, it will, in all probability, not be too long before a Talibanized Pakistan becomes a reality and freed, as it would be, of international obligations and control it could pose a much graver threat to India than it has ever done. The aim here is not to strike a pessimistic note of despair and despondency but only to stress the need for India to recognise the inevitability of a confrontation with the state sponsored Taliban sooner than later so as to utilise the present period of no action to prepare adequately for the contingency that appears so imminent.

Considering India's tremendous sources of military power – particularly its population that constitutes a huge reservoir of the world's finest fighting material and a well balanced economy capable of sustaining a fight to the finish – the country is quite capable of meeting any threat to its security. The existence of the Taliban threat, therefore, should not by itself be a source of any anxiety for us. The real source of anxiety stems from the usual reluctance on the part of our political leadership in mobilising our resources and preparing to meet any threat squarely. Interestingly, while some small reference has been made to local terrorist activity, no political party aspiring for power after the elections has made any reference to the existence of the Taliban threat, what to talk of spelling out action required to be taken for meeting it.

One's worst fears are that under the pressure of the colossal effort required to match defence preparedness with the nature and magnitude of the enemy threat, the nation may, as it has been doing all along since Independence, opt for a policy of sweeping a portion of the enemy threat under the carpet if only to keep our defence objectives within the ambit of national convenience.

There is no point in recounting those horrid days of November 1962 when we suffered a humiliating defeat in the war with China which came even as we wishfully hoped that China would stand deterred by the magical spell of *Hindi chini bhai bhai* diplomacy. No lessons seem to have been learnt from the Chinese invasion as we still refused to grow militarily to the extent necessary for meeting the threat that remained as it was. The spectacular leap under which India raised the strength of its Armed Forces from 2 lakh to 10 lakh within a year and a half or less after the '62 war was still woefully inadequate to meet the combined threat from China and Pakistan. Apparently in a pick and choose act, to which we were certainly not entitled, we decided to shift the inconvenient threat from China to the back burner and prepare only for the more convenient threat from Pakistan. The sagacity of our decision to avoid confrontation with China has yet to go through the litmus test. God help us if it fails.

The Indo-Pak war that followed in 1965 was then to show that we were not adequately prepared even for a fight with Pakistan singly. Even though the Indian Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri turned the country's existing defence policy on its head by carrying the war into Pakistan, the Indian armed forces failed to take advantage of the change to defeat Pakistan decisively once for all for want of adequate superiority in strength. After having had to maintain

a token presence along the Indo-Tibetan border, the Indian Army was able to muster strength just a little above parity with Pakistan, which resulted in a stalemate just after 10 days into the war. As if we had hit the end in our capacity to raise our military strength any further, the equation remained the same on the Western front during the Indo-Pak war of 1971 again leading to a stalemate on this front within the first few days into the war. What made the difference on the Eastern front was that by taking the risk of ignoring the Chinese threat India could pull out greater number of troops from the Indo-Tibetan border to create a 2:1 superiority against East Pakistan. We had about eight months to prepare for this war and by creating a more favourable equation vis-à-vis Pakistan army on the Western front we may well have liberated most if not the whole of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir before the end of the war.

No raise in the strength of the Indian Army was made even when its commitments increased many fold following the start of Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir. With an open war against Pakistan over the issue ruled out for want of adequate military strength, the Indian Army settled for the ongoing disadvantageous war with Pakistan. During the Kargil war, in between, we carried the day because of the superb strategic acumen and diplomatic sagacity displayed by our political leadership in keeping the war zone restricted to Kargil. With its task restricted to Kargil alone the Army was able to create, even from its existing resources, an adequate numerical and fire-power superiority against the intruders even as the stunning valour of the Indian troops made up for material deficiencies if any remained.

India's latest thinking on defence is reflected in the report of the Kargil Review Committee, set up after the Kargil war. While warning the country of dangers of holding all the "heights and similar un-held unpopulated gaps in the High Himalayas along the entire length of the northern border" the report suggests that "the alternative should be a credible declaratory policy of swiftly punishing wanton and wilful violations of the sanctity of the LOC." But the question that still remains is to punish with what? Had we the necessary military strength to punish the defaulters where would have been the need to make any declaration of our intent? India's military strength would have spoken for itself and Pakistan would not have felt tempted to take recourse to war with India again and again in pursuit of its political objectives.

The fact of the matter is that although, on the face of it, India has military strength which is more than twice that of Pakistan, it has commitments to match and the strength that it can spare against Pakistan, while enough to prevent it from achieving its objectives, is not enough to defeat it decisively. Any suggestion for punishing violations of the sanctity of the LOC should, therefore, have been backed with recommendations for an appropriate increase in our military strength. The Kargil Review Committee while failing to make any such recommendation has gone on to laud the decision of the Government, to cut the strength of the armed forces by 50,000, as a wise one. Interestingly the Kargil Review Committee has itself wondered how Pakistan "could sustain its proxy war against India, inflicting thousands of casualties, without being unduly concerned about India's conventional superiority" but rather than attributing this to inadequacy of India's "conventional superiority" over Pakistan, the Committee, by some queer logic, assumes this to be due to Pakistan's possession of a nuclear deterrent. With India possessing a nuclear capability many times greater than that of Pakistan the latter can hardly be considered to be in a position to indulge in any nuclear black-mail.

With the Indian Army's internal security commitments increasing ever so much and Pakistan's military strength getting augmented with Taliban guerrillas, even the little edge in military strength that India has over Pakistan is likely to disappear very soon. To meet the Taliban threat

India must grow enough militarily to establish a convincing superiority over Pakistan – Taliban combine. We have the means to do it only the **will** seems to be lacking.