

**By Sidharth Mishra**



Sometime in the 1950s, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had called his Chief of Army Staff General KS Thimayya for an urgent meeting. Gen Timmy, as the Chief was popularly addressed, did not exactly enjoy a warm relationship with the Prime Minister. On his way to the Prime Minister's office, the General could not really gauge the agenda behind this urgent meeting. Nehru received his Chief with due courtesies and did not take much time to come to the point. "General there is a talk in the town about your performance on the dance floor with a pretty lady at a party," the Prime Minister said. An officer gifted with excellent wit, Gen Timmy was quick with his reply, "Prime Minister you should be happy that post-office hour I don't spend time planning a coup." Both statesmen had made their point and the discussion on the topic ended there.

There is no way to confirm this conversation but it is part of the Indian Army folklore. In the past three-and-half decades of interacting with the Indian armed forces, I have often heard this story. I believe it to be true. It's to the credit of the officers of the post-Independence decade like Field Marshal KM Cariappa, Gens KS Thimayya, SM Shrinagesh, and Maharaj Shri Rajendrasinhji that we today have an army which acts as a part of India's state policy. Their contemporaries across the border held little value for the civilian control of the military.

The terrorist fidayeen attack at the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot in no uncertain terms underlines the fact that civilian engagement between India and Pakistan holds little water if the neighbouring country's military establishment is not onboard. The attack last week at Pathankot only went on to reiterate the point. Attacks have been launched by forces either backed by or close to the Pakistani military establishment whenever the civilian leadership of the two countries has shown the courage to walk the peace talk. The Pathankot incident is no exception.

Why is the Pakistani military establishment averse to smoking the peace pipe? A common man's understanding of the issue is that in the case of a permanent peace arrangement with India, the army would lose its predominant position in Pakistan society. Now, can this factor weigh more on the strategy of Pakistani military than the damage the terror organisations have caused to them?

In December 2014, seven gunmen belonging to the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar, killing 141 persons including 132 pupils aged between eight and 18 years. Thanks to the counter operations launched by the Pakistan Army's elite Special Services Group (SSG) Special Forces, which killed all seven terrorists, 960 people from the school were rescued. This was an attack on the Pakistan military's establishment, killing their children.

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However, the Pakistan military establishment has learnt little from the episode.

While it has waged a battle against Tehrik-i-Taliban, it has continued to support organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. According to news reports, soon after Peshawar massacre Pakistan army Chief General Raheel Sharif, accompanied by Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant-General Rizwan Akhtar, went to Kabul to register Pakistan's protest over Afghanistan's lack of action against the Taliban. News reports emanating from Pakistan had even claimed that General Raheel delivered a message to Afghan National Army Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Sher Mohammad Karimi, "to take decisive action against sanctuaries of the TTP or else Pakistan would go for a hot pursuit".

While the Pakistan army protested in Kabul, it has done little to support its own Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's initiatives to end the confrontation with India. His Indian counterpart Narendra Modi too has made dramatic moves to get the comprehensive dialogue process going between the two nations despite attempts to thwart the same by elements inimical to Indian interests.

Having discussed the fallout of the Pathankot attack on the cross-border relationships, it's also important that we take a note of our preparedness to counter elements who want to thwart peace initiatives. A defence ministry release after the attack said, "Due to the effective preparation and coordinated efforts by all the security agencies a group of terrorists were detected by the aerial surveillance platforms as soon as they entered the Air Force Station at Pathankot. The infiltrators were immediately engaged and contained within a limited area, thus preventing them from entering the technical zone where high-value assets are parked."

Even though the Pathankot attack has been thwarted, what's of greater concern is that the adversary repeatedly makes attempts to infiltrate into our territory. This is third big attempt in the neighbouring districts of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. Such attacks are not possible without local support. These terror operations indicate that sleeper cells are active in the area. Possibly they have prospered on the thriving drug smuggling business in the border districts.

The history of major terror attacks in our country has repeatedly shown that they happened because there was a mole within or the system stood corroded. While the Ministry of External Affairs would take appropriate measures on the diplomatic front, the Ministry of Home Affairs too needs to proactively put our house in order, especially in the border districts. For a long time, this nation has been paying a price to terrorism, which has thrived on internal support.

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