

THE CHANGING FIGHT OF INDIAN INTELLIGENCE: FAILURES, BUREAUCRATIC AND POLITICAL STAKEHOLDRISM

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Intelligence organizations of the twenty first century make outstretched distinction between operations, analysis, and functions. Field officers collect intelligence, analysts analyze information, and processors categorize it to help policy makers in designing military strategies. Any civilian or military government that wants to professionalize its intelligence infrastructure, and prevent it from decaying needs statecraft, which is comprised of economic power, and a strong military force and mature diplomacy. The case is quite different in India and Pakistan, where emerging contradictions in the state system, ethnic and sectarian divide, and failure of intelligence and internal security strategies generated a countrywide debate, in which experts deeply criticised the waste of financial resources by their intelligence agencies in an unnecessary proxy war in South Asia. Intelligence reform in India has been the most controversial issue as reform committees have been hijacked by political and bureaucratic stakeholders.¹

In fact, the challenges India faces are to bring its intelligence agencies under democratic control and introduce security sector reforms have become more complicated when stakeholders adamantly refuse to change the culture of unnecessary spying on neighbouring states. The principal debate among these stakeholders also starts with the assumption that counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency decision making is influenced by intelligence analysis. When we read books and journals on Indian intelligence studies, we come across several counterinsurgency controversies of the state-the way it fights insurgents in Kashmir and Punjab provinces.² Indian analyst Srinath Raghavan exposed the failure of Indian intelligence to report the infiltration of Chinese PLA commandos into the Indian Territory in May 1962:

“On 06 May 1962, about 100 Chinese troops, in assault formation, advanced towards an Indian post in the Chip Chap valley in the Ladakh sector. In the event, the Chinese backed off without

attacking. The next flashpoint was the Galwan valley in Ladakh where Indian forces established a picket on 4 July. The Chinese responded swiftly. By 10 July the PLA had surrounded the post, sealed all possible withdrawal routes, and advanced within 100 yards of the post.....Meantime, the eastern sector of the frontier (now Arunachal Pradesh) was getting active too. In response to an Indian attempt to establish a post near the Namka Chu River, the Chinese occupies the bridge dominating the river”.³

The nucleus of Mr. Srinath Raghavan argument inculcates us about the Chinese army attempts to crossed the Indian Territory; the Indian intelligence had failed to report to the centre on time. However, in his Indian Express analysis (2016), Mr. Pradip Sagar notes some aspects of intelligence failure during the Kargil war and the Uri terrorist attacks: “Many former Indian army Chiefs of Staff and Directors General of Military Operations had unanimously felt any large-scale Pakistani military intrusion in Kargil because it lacked infrastructure and logistical support. This perception was formed after analysing confrontation in 1948, 1965 and 1971, when the Indian army dominated Pakistani forces in the area. There was also minimal cross-LOC military activity. Additionally, considering the challenging terrain and weather conditions, the Indian military mindset underestimated the Pakistani threat in Kargil. After Uri, a look at why intelligence failures happen: Eighteen soldiers died at Uri, marking one of the worse Indian intelligence failures of recent times”.⁴

The biggest Indian intelligence failure occurred in 1999 in the Kargil war between India and Pakistan, in which RAW failed to report infiltration of Pakistan army units into the region. Indian analyst Prem Mahadevan in his research paper (2011) spotlighted important aspects of intelligence failures in Kargil war. Pakistani forces crossed Indian border while Indian intelligence was unable to spotlight their locations: “During the summer of 1999, India and Pakistan fought a 10-week limited war in Kargil, a remote area of Kashmir. Fighting broke out in May, when Indian troops discovered that a number of armed men had crossed the Line of Control (LOC) and entrenched themselves on the Indian side. Over the following weeks, the Indian army learned that these gunmen were not Islamist guerrillas, as it had first assumed, but Pakistani soldiers in Mufti. A security crisis erupted, with allegation of ‘failure’ being thrown at the Indian intelligence agencies”.⁵

During the last three decades, there have been tenacious efforts in India to introduce security sector reforms in order to bring intelligence agencies under democratic control, but notwithstanding the last reform proposals of the Naresh Chandra Committee (2012), democratic governments in the country could not succeed to bell the cat. Since the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990s, internal conflicts in India deeply impacted the performance of its intelligence mechanism. The emergence of sectarian mafia groups, and new terrorist organisations like the Daesh and Taliban further embroiled Indian intelligence agencies in an unending domestic violence.⁶

The long and interminable fight of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) with domestic separatism and international terrorism brought about many changes in the attitude of its stakeholders and policy makers to control their self-designed operational strategies that caused misunderstandings between India and its neighbours. In states like Kashmir, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Assam, several separatist and terrorist groups emerged with new tactics, while the recent Pathankot terrorist attack generated a new debate about the failed strategies of the Indian administration, weak security approach, and power politics within the intelligence infrastructure. These and other incidents showed that intelligence review committees, reports and political parties were right in their criticism of the operational flaws of the agencies.⁷

The Mumbai attacks (2008) unveiled a number of terrorist tactics that prevailed in the country. Those tactics and the way terrorists targeted civilians and the police were new to RAW and the IB. Once again, in Delhi, intellectual circles and policy makers started debates with the assumption that counterterrorism operations had been influenced by weak intelligence analyses in the country. They also raised the question of check and balance, while the bureaucratic and political involvement further added to their pain. The exponentially growing politicisation, radicalisation and sectarian divides within ranks of all intelligence agencies including RAW and the IB, and violence across the country painted a negative picture of the unprofessional intelligence approach to the national security of India.⁸

The perception that the agencies decide whatever they want without restricting themselves to the advisory role causes misunderstanding between the citizens and the state. Political rivalries, poor coordination, sectarian and political affiliations, uncorroborated reports, and lack of motivation are issues that need the immediate attention of Indian policy makers. Moreover, numerous intelligence committees like the Henderson-Brook Committee on the Indo-China war and India's defeat in 1962; B S Raghavan IAS Committee on the failure of intelligence during the 1965 Indo-Pak war; L P Singh Committee; K.S Nair Committee; the 1999 Kargil Review Committee; and the Ram Pradham Committee on the intelligence failure during the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai have taken place after every big perceived intelligence failure.⁹

In spite the establishment of several investigation committees into the failure of Indian intelligence in yesteryears, and the reform packages passed by parliament, the RAW, IB and military intelligence are still dancing to different tangos, and never been able to respond to a series of terrorist attacks (14 February 2019) of Pakistan based extremist and terrorist groups in Kashmir. Janani Krishnaswamy (2013) in her research paper on the causes of Indian intelligence failure diverted public attention to the causes of failures:

“Why do our secret intelligence agencies fail repeatedly? It is because of (a) lack of adequate intelligence, (b) dearth of trained manpower in the intelligence sector, (c) lack of proper intelligence sharing between the centre and the state, (d) lack of action on available intelligence, (e) the current state of political instability or (f) the lack of sensible intelligence reforms? In the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Dilsukhnagar in Hyderabad, India’s secret intelligence agencies were subjected to an intense inspection. Heated political debates over the construction of the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), a controversial anti-terror hub that was proposed in the aftermath of 26/11 attacks, was stirred up after five years. Are such organization reforms sufficient to fix the problems of the intelligence community? Intelligence reviews committees and politicians constantly assess the performance of intelligence agencies and underline numerous failures within the intelligence system”.¹⁰

In addition to these committees, several investigative reports were prepared to spotlight the failure of RAW, MI, IB and other civilian and military agencies in response to major terrorist attacks against India. Lack of legal and parliamentary oversight has been a very complicated issue since the Kargil war as several stakeholders refused to allow the judiciary and parliamentary committees to investigate the ooze. More than 70 percent of Indians do not know about the basic functions of their country’s secret agencies, because the cover of secrecy often serves as a blanket of immunity from legal action, accountability and misuse of taxpayers’ money.¹¹

The operational incompetence of the Indian intelligence has now become legendary as it failed to defend the country during the Kargil, (1999) Mumbai (2008) Pathankot (2016, and Kashmir (2019) attacks. They even get away with failures in violence-infected regions such as Kashmir and Assam. This way of intelligence mechanism has raised many questions including waste of money and resources.¹² The alleged involvement of Indian intelligence agencies in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Nepal generated controversial stories in print and electronic media. In Afghanistan, there are speculations that Indian intelligence agencies use the country against Pakistan, and recruit Afghans and Pakistanis to carry out terrorist attacks in Baluchistan. Afghan military and political leadership has also expressed the same concern in their private meetings that their country serves the interests of India in the region.

Terror attacks, whether in Assam or Kashmir, have exacerbated by the day, which lead policy makers to the conclusion that the involvement of intelligence agencies in proxy wars across borders causes major terror incidents in the country. Amidst all these failures and incomplete intelligence stories, Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to bring his own team of experts in order to introduce reforms of security sector and bring intelligence under democratic control, but he also needs to understand the difficulties faced by his predecessors. He also needs to find out why RAW and the IB lack cryptanalysts who break enemy codes and ciphers despite India’s aggrandisement in the field of computer technologies.¹³ This deficit is in a stark contrast to regional trends where state agencies have been hiring an ever-greater number of experts. In an

Indian Express article in 2014, journalist Praveen Swami noted: “India’s over five-year efforts to monitor encrypted traffic-run by mainly military-staffed National Technical Research Organisation-has failed to make progress in decrypting even chat programmes used by terrorists, like Viber and Skype.”¹⁴

The Kargil Review Committee found that human intelligence aspect of Indian intelligence agencies was weak. During the Kargil war, RAW succeeded in intercepting the telephone conversation between General Musharaf and his then Chief of General Staff Lt Gen Aziz, which provided crucial evidence to international media that the operation was being controlled from military headquarters in Rawalpindi.¹⁵ Experts perceive it as a major intelligence success. Moreover, the Kargil Review Committee also criticised military intelligence for its failure related to the absence of updated and accurate intelligence information on the induction and de-induction of military battalions, and the lack of expertise to spotlight military battalions in the Kargil area in 1998.¹⁶

The committee further criticised lack of fresh information, which makes it impossible for an intelligence agency to make an accurate judgement of the looming threat.¹⁷ According to Indian intellectual circles, rivalry among the intelligence agencies and the issue of appointment in war zones or violence-infected areas has badly affected counterterrorism efforts across the country. In a country like India where credit-snatching influences intelligence analyses, there is no way to judge the accuracy of collected intelligence information.¹⁸

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