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Restraint No More: India Reassesses Its Hard Power

With its cross-border covert strike into Myanmar, India's views on hard power come into focus.

By Harsh V. Pant

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On June 4, tribal guerrillas, using rocket-propelled grenades and detonating improvised explosive devices, killed 20 soldiers and injured several others, in an ambush when a military convoy was traveling to the state capital Imphal from the town of Motul in Manipur. This was one of the most serious attacks on Indian security forces in Manipur for some time. India has struggled to contain the unrest in Manipur despite granting its security forces sweeping shoot-to-kill powers in so-called “disturbed areas” under the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

India's response to these attacks came five days later—on June 9—when the Indian army attacked rebel camps inside Myanmar early Tuesday morning, destroying two camps and killing up to 15 rebels. Underlining India's resolve to preempt terror threats, undeterred by borders, Para Commandos of the Indian Army carried out surgical operations deep inside Myanmar killing several militants in two rebel camps. The Army's message was terse: “while ensuring peace and tranquility along the border and in border states, any threat to our security, safety and national integrity will meet a firm response.” Indian Army had “credible and specific intelligence” on the basis of which it carried out the attacks. The director of the office of Myanmar President Thein Sein, Zaw Htay, confirmed a day later that Indian troops had entered his country's borders. He

said that there was “coordination and cooperation” between authorities but no Myanmar soldiers were directly involved.

Responding to a query as to whether India can conduct such an operation inside Pakistan, Indian Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore said: “This should be a message to all countries and organizations who foster terrorism against India, including Pakistan.” This set off alarm bells in Pakistan, where sections of the media and defense officials suggested that the incident could set a precedent for more cross-border raids. Pakistan’s interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, warned India that “Pakistan is not Myanmar”—a fact all too obvious to most Indians.

By all accounts, the raid was well-planned and competently executed. The operation was important to lift the sagging morale of the armed forces, especially after attacks by insurgents in Manipur. All sections of the government—the intelligence agencies, the armed forces, and the Ministry of External Affairs—worked as an organic whole under the leadership of the prime minister and the national security adviser. This is a rarity in Indian policy-making and should be recognized as such.

Though the Indian Army had conducted a number of cross-border raids in the past in collaboration with partner countries, the speed with which this attack was carried out after the initial terror attacks was not only unprecedented but also demonstrates a new level of confidence among India’s political authorities in wielding hard power.

Also, with this raid, a multi-layered border policy seems to be emerging. The Modi government has, from the very beginning, followed a policy of ‘disproportionate response’ to border provocations. Indian troops have been given greater operational autonomy to be aggressive in responding to ceasefire violations by Pakistan. The Indian military has been given the much-needed operational space to carve out a response which was swift, sharp and effective, underlining the costs of Pakistan’s dangerous escalatory tactics with massive targeted attacks on Pakistani Ranger posts along the border. What has worked on the border with Myanmar will clearly not work on the western borders against jihadi groups and that contextualization has been part of the Indian government’s response. Also, cooperation with like-minded states such as Myanmar and Bangladesh will be crucial to deny terror group safe havens across the borders. The government of Myanmar reportedly approved the Indian plan to send in special forces to attack insurgent camps into its territory. To justify its attack, New Delhi invoked the May 2014 border agreement with Myanmar which provides for a framework for security cooperation and intelligence exchange between the two states.

Despite this, a narrative has emerged in the country which holds that while the operation was well planned, the political communication was unnecessary and immature. Sections of the media, former diplomats, and armchair strategists have converged in suggesting that the Modi government messed up a fine operation by talking about it. The argument goes that covert operations by their very definition should not be talked about. Clearly, restraint should be the norm while discussing security operations but the Indian Army’s operation in Myanmar was important to be publicized. To say that the Indian government should have undertaken such a risky move with little or no publicity is a bit of a nonsense really. It was imperative for the Modi

government to send out a message in unambiguous terms that India retains the ability to hit back at the insurgents.

Signalling intent and demonstrating capabilities are key in establishing and strengthening deterrence in interstate relations. There is a reason why all major powers make a big deal when they resort to the use of their military instruments of hard power. In fact, rather than a junior minister, it would have been better for the NSA or the prime minister to speak directly to the people of India about the Myanmar raid and its implications. This is the norm in mature democracies. After all, the message is not simply for the domestic audience. It is also there to reassure allies and to deter adversaries.

India's friends and enemies have long stopped taking India seriously as a military power. A nation's vital interests, in the ultimate analysis, can only be preserved and enhanced if the nation has sufficient power capabilities at its disposal. But not only must a nation possess such capabilities – there must also be a willingness to employ the required forms of power in pursuit of those interests. India's lack of an instinct for power is most palpable in the realm of the military, where, unlike other major global powers of the past and the present, India has failed to master the creation, deployment and use of its military instruments in support of its national objectives. A state's legitimacy is tied to its ability to monopolize the use of force and operate effectively in an international strategic environment, and India has lacked clarity on this relationship between the use of force and its strategic priorities.

New Delhi is sending a clear signal to its adversaries—both state and non-state—that hostilities against India will not go on without a robust response. The Myanmar operation was a step towards restoring India's credibility. But it is a long road ahead and the effectiveness of this new “Modi-Doval” doctrine, as it has been termed in the media, will be known only over the long-term.