

Pulwama Terror Attack: The Cost of Complacency

By P S Rajeev

India mourned the tragic death of 42 brave soldiers killed in the worst terror strike the security forces had ever witnessed in decades on February 14, 2019 near Awantipora, in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir. The nation stood united, in tears and with angst, against the incident in which a suicide vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device (SVBIED) hit a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy, leaving one of the buses blown into smithereens. The political class vowed to take revenge and the united citizens of India stood behind them. The incident incited anti-terrorism and anti-Pakistan slogans in the Kashmir Valley after a long while. It also prompted a stand-off between India and Pakistan, the coverage of which has flooded the news media in both countries.

This article is not essentially about the military stand-off; rather, it addresses the very event that prompted it all – the Pulwama terror attack. This is because the incident has much more significance than it captured and could lead one to realise the perplexity of the current security scenario in one of the world's highly militarised zones. Although the sentiment across the nation echoed solidarity, some adventurists on social media platforms, though in small numbers, questioned the timing of the blast when the general elections are due to be conducted in the country.

Nevertheless, the Pulwama terror strike evokes a lot of questions about the nation's commitment to save and secure the lives of its soldiers who guard one of the hostile regions of the nation. The Pulwama terror strike also points to some serious interventions the political class administered on the security practices in Jammu and Kashmir. Those interventions, which came out of appeasement and adjustments, have now put the lives of security personnel in the state at high risk.

The Incident

The CRPF in Jammu and Kashmir has a strength of 65,000 boots on the ground, spread across 61 battalions. Troop movement from Jammu to Srinagar and vice versa happens on alternate days due to a number of reasons ranging from operational requirement to simple transfers of men who return back after their annual leaves. Landslides and snowfall might hamper such troop movements in the winters as roads often get covered by snow or mud. As CRPF's Jammu station cannot accommodate more than 1000 men, the rest have to be shifted to nearby places. Sometimes, the winters would leave the soldiers stranded midway and reports suggest that in worst cases the number of stranded soldiers could reach up to 4000.

As per press reports, on February 4, 2019 there were 2,871 stranded personnel waiting to be shifted. Usually, the strength of convoy is increased to balance the personnel distribution or to clear the backlog. It was during that attempt, on February 14, the attack occurred. When the convoy was passing through Lethpora area, an explosive-laden vehicle entered the Jammu-Srinagar highway (NH 44) from a left by-lane and overtook the fifth bus in the convoy, colliding it and blasting-off on impact, reducing the bus to a distorted mass of molten iron and killing the soldiers in it.

The Questions

Essentially, one would wonder how could anyone mount an attack on a huge paramilitary convoy out in the open, with a SVBIED, undetected and unstopped. How could a civilian vehicle even be allowed in the vicinity of a convoy in movement and that too in a sensitive area like Kashmir? These questions reverberated in news and on social media platforms. To understand the circumstances, one should take a closer look at the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in place for such troop movements.

As per the SOP followed by the CRPF, initially, Road Opening Party (ROP) clears the particular stretch of road, sanitising it from any mines, bombs or IEDs. Additional men with weapons are allotted as per the size of the convoy to fight back, in case of any unexpected events. The whole journey is planned well in advance and the pace of movement is fixed along with the time for any halts. In the Kashmiri conditions, this process will become efficient when there is no parallel civilian traffic. This was the case until 2003. Civilian vehicles were stopped and not allowed to travel alongside a military convoy before 2003. No civilian vehicles were allowed to overtake the convoy which travel in a single 'closed-box' formation.

However, this practice was suspended by the Mufti Mohammad Sayeed-led state government in 2003, citing alleged harassment of local people on the roads by the military and depriving them of the freedom of movement. Mufti government's possible appeasement tactic was later supported by the Centre, thinking that a 'human touch' was the need of the hour to attract the support of local public. That 'human touch' possibly led to the loss of 42 human lives.

The Timing

Recently, South Kashmir has turned out to be a new battle ground and a brewery for the terror outfits. Terror organisations discovered several ways to reach out to the Kashmiri youth to be indoctrinated and recruited to their ranks. The perpetrator of Pulwama attack - Adil Ahmad Dar - was believed to be one among them, trained by the militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). A video featuring the young terrorist was his last call to woo other young folks in the state to follow his path to 'glory'. The exact motive of the attack is nowhere mentioned in the video. Therefore, the next question that comes up is the motive behind this attack, and the recent events in the Valley would likely give a strong hint.

In December 2018, Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir launched an exhaustive search operation for an Afghan war veteran named [Abdul Rasheed Ghazi](#), who reportedly infiltrated into Indian-Administered Kashmir. His mission was to train local terrorists and oversee a 'spectacular' attack in the state. Ghazi, accompanied by two other Jaish leaders, was successful in hoodwinking security forces and was believed to have reached Pulwama by December 9, 2018, travelling largely by foot and public transport. Intelligence inputs suggested that Ghazi, an IED expert, was handpicked by the JeM chief Maulana Masood Azhar to avenge the killing of his nephews in Kashmir in the past year. Talha Rasheed and Usman Haider, the nephews of Masood Azhar were believed to have been killed in an operation by the Indian security forces in November 2017. The two were dispatched to India by Masood to motivate, train and recruit local youth to JeM.

The Pattern

Jaish-e-Mohammad announced its arrival in India by carrying out a suicide car bomb blast in April 2000, where a 17-year-old local, Afaq Ahmad Shah drove a hatchback car filled with explosives into the gates of Badami Bagh Army Cantonment. Even though the Valley had witnessed around 50 suicide attacks in the past years, the use of car bomb or SVBIED continues to be Jaish's very own modus operandi.

At a time when Lashkar-e-Toiba was on a back-foot due to the constant international scrutiny of its leader Hafees Sayeed, the pressure was mounting upon Hizb-ul Mujahideen. The situation demanded JeM to take up the lead in Kashmir. It is undeniable that the distress among the local population against the security interventions and the alleged human rights violations by the Indian security forces gave new ground for militants to gather ground support. Young men in the Valley saw joining militancy as a means of demonstrating their protest. They were wooed, inducted and trained by the militant groups to mount attack on India from several fronts.

CRPF convoys were targeted in a series of attacks in 2016, killing 10 security personnel in the Kashmir Valley. The paramilitary force's ROPs were attacked a number of times too. In 2018 itself, there were nine IED blasts aimed at CRPF men, without any casualty. Masood Azhar's plan of sending an expert like Abdul Rasheed Ghazi to execute a 'spectacular attack' would have rang a bell within the Indian intelligence community. Even with the constant flow of intel, the analysts in the Military Intelligence, Intelligence Bureau (IB) or Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) seem to have failed to connect the dots. The base of intelligence analysis is always to identify the pattern underneath the obvious chaos. The events that unfolded do point to a serious lapse on the part of analysts in the Indian intelligence community in effectively processing the invaluable intel inputs.

Specifically, this is not an attempt to imply that serious intelligence fallout led to this drastic event of February 14. However, no one can ignore the lack of efficient analysis of intelligence input gathered by the security forces. Ghazi's assignment to oversee a 'spectacular attack' should have given a formidable cue to intelligence analysts. Further, Ghazi being an IED expert should also have led the analysts to think of a possible attack of large magnitude. It should have led to an evaluation of a possible high-intense attack against the security forces, as Masood Azhar had a plan of retribution in his mind when he handpicked someone like Ghazi. However, given the secrecy of India's intelligence framework, it is still unknown whether the agencies have handed over any such reports to governments or not and the government has given adequate importance to the report filed by the intelligence agencies or not. Therefore, it would highly be unfair to accuse the intelligence agencies in this instance, although there are traces of inefficient demeanours.

Obviously, it could also be argued that a SVBIED attack is really difficult to avert when it is targeted upon a moving object like a convoy. We can only try to divert a SVBIED attack by putting barricades and choke points to reduce the speed of the incoming vehicle and eventually shoot them down. Therefore, it could be deduced that securing a moving target from a SVBIED attack in the Kashmir-like condition is possible only through banning parallel civilian traffic completely and establishing high vigil at every check point. In other words, relaxing the SOPs should be considered as the single most factor that let the terrorists carry out their plan of attack. This root cause points to

the complacent approach of the political class who wanted to give a human touch to security measures, the price of which was paid heavily by the security forces.

The Postlude

Undoubtedly, the deductions stated above are not finite. It is because the state of affairs is so complex to put forth in a single, definite deduction and there is a lack of evidence too. Nevertheless, the Pulwama terror strike demands a rethinking both in the political and military circles. On the one hand the human rights of civilians are to be valued, and on the other hand the nation cannot afford to lose its highly trained soldiers in such a callous manner again.

The state of security provisions in Kashmir needs to be re-evaluated and analytical tools based on advanced Security Sector Reforms (SSR) designed in line with the special nature of the state have to be employed. The nature of interaction the security forces have with the local public should also be evaluated and proper training should be given to the personnel to mitigate any risk of friction that could lead to serious distress among the populace. Conscious efforts should pour in to build a rapport between the security forces and the public, and reduce instances that would lead to human rights violations. Moreover, this would be a strong deterrent to locals joining the terror group as a protest against the security personnel's rude behaviour.

Above all, every stakeholder should be informed through a clear message that the presence of security forces in Jammu and Kashmir is to eliminate the threat of militants intervening the peace and stability of the region. Security forces should be allowed to fix and practice effective SOPs to avert incidents like Pulwama and secure themselves and the region. This should not get diluted by any sort of political decision, because it is ultimately the forces, not the policymakers, who face the real threat out in the open. Therefore, they need to ensure that the established security practices or SOPs are observed thoroughly, regardless of the small difficulties it could bring to the social life in the state. This is essential to secure precious lives. After all, no human rights are above human lives.