

## India's Internal Security Challenges\*

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Shri N N Vohra, Shri K Santhanam, Director IDSA, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I deem it a privilege to be invited to deliver the IDSA Foundation Lecture. Since inception in November 1965, under the stewardship of the late Shri Y B Chavan and the subsequent direction provided by Shri K Subrahmanyam, former Director, the IDSA has acquired a creditable profile. Over the years, the IDSA has played a commendable role in enriching the security discourse and deliberations in India. It is in this context that I propose to share my thoughts with you on a matter of concern to all of us, namely, "India's Internal Security Challenges".

India was partitioned in the backdrop of large-scale communal riots, but the partition of the country on religious lines, without taking into consideration its multiple identities, instead of bringing the communal tensions down, in fact, worsened the situation. The two-nation theory created Pakistan, and it still survives on this theory. Pakistan finds it difficult to accept the reality that India continues to be a democratic, plural, multi-religious society and that India today has more Muslim citizens than Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan has taken upon itself the responsibility of not only protecting its own citizens, but also the Indian Muslims. The power structure in theocratic Pakistan, dominated by the army, the feudal landlords, the bureaucracy and the religious leaders has been able to retain its hold over the levers of power by playing the anti-India and Islamic cards. Pakistan plays the Islamic card in its foreign policy also. It misses no opportunity to club India as an anti-Islamic country where Muslims are not safe. The continuing tensions between India and Pakistan have a direct bearing on the internal situation in India. They have further complicated the internal security situation.

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The management of internal security, therefore, assumes great importance. If the internal security issues are tackled effectively, subversion by the external forces to that extent becomes more difficult. Unfortunately, the rise of contentious politics based on sectarian, ethnic, linguistic or other divisive criteria, is primarily responsible for the many communal and secessionist movements flourishing in India. The presence of hostile neighbours enables the internal conflicts to get external support, which includes money, arms and sanctuaries. The vested interests exploit these conditions to pursue their own agenda.

In a well-established political system and a developed economy, conflicts between the various group identities are kept under check as in due course they get assimilated into the national identity. But that has not happened in India as yet, where the wounds of the partition and the colonial rule have still not fully healed. Moreover, the dependence on the government by a large section of our people for their very survival sharpens these conflicts among them. The democratic institutions and the state structures are still not strong enough to fully harmonise these conflicts in a peaceful manner. Violence erupts when conflicting interests cannot be consensually reconciled. The hostile external forces, taking advantage of this situation through subversive propaganda, further accentuate these conflicts. They give material and ideological support to aggravate this sense of grievance to such an extent that a small minority are willing to become tools in their hands to subvert the stability and security of the country.

In addition, a number of secessionist and the so-called revolutionary movements are operating in India today. Their goal could be to overthrow the government and bring about revolutionary changes in the structure and functioning of the state, or even secession from the Indian Union. Ever since independence, India has been facing all types of violent conflicts based on religion, caste, language, ethnicity and regional loyalties. Political insecurity further compounds the problem. Preoccupied with the problem of survival, the governments in some of the most affected states are not looking at the problem from a long-term perspective. They have bought temporary peace by compromising with the subversive forces. Such shortsighted policies can have disastrous consequences in the long run. Instead of effectively dealing with them in the initial stages when the problem is manageable, they have allowed these anti-national forces to take roots and spread their tentacles far and wide. When a state government

is unable to effectively deal with them, instead of strengthening the state police machinery, it rushes to the Centre to hand over its responsibility at the first sign of any serious trouble. It is not surprising that in these states some sections of the police have actually joined hands with the subversive forces against the central forces. “If you cannot fight them, join them”. Finding themselves at the mercy of these subversive forces, the people tend to change sides and start supporting them instead of supporting the security forces. It would be wrong to assume that all those supporting, directly or indirectly, these forces are sympathetic to their ideology. Far from it! For most of them, preoccupied with the daily battle of survival, this is the obvious choice, because the police are unable to protect them. Polarisation on caste and religious lines can further reduce the credibility of the police in the minds of the people.

The police-politician-criminal nexus can embolden the criminal elements. Their activities can create an environment of lawlessness, where influential and rich people violate the law with impunity. The police is not the only component of the criminal justice system that has suffered because of this nexus. In fact, the entire criminal justice system is under strain. Not all crimes are being registered and those registered are not being properly investigated; and even out of those charge-sheeted, very few are ending in conviction. The conviction rate in case of heinous crimes is steadily falling. In some North-Eastern states it has reached almost zero level, where the police have stopped even submitting the charge sheets in the insurgency-related cases. When the fear of legal punishment disappears, organised crime finds it convenient to spread its tentacles. The crime syndicates are finding the new communication and information technology very useful. Extortion and payment of the so-called ‘protection money’ is more widespread than we would like to believe. According to some reports, direct extortion from the government funds runs into hundreds of crores of rupees. Many of the insurgent and militant groups are not driven by ideology, but by sheer greed. Money power is a bigger motivating factor than ideology. Vested interests have developed around these groups with active connivance of corrupt politicians, police officers and civil servants. Some politicians even take their assistance during election times. They have to return their favours when they come to power. This mutually beneficial relationship has seriously damaged the quality of governance in the interior areas. The real losers are the people. The development process

gets seriously hampered in a violent environment. When large development funds are siphoned out by this unholy alliance between the criminal and corrupt forces, even the delivery of the most basic services like water, power, healthcare, education and communications becomes a stupendous task.

A vicious circle starts. The deprived and the marginalised sections of the society, unable to survive in the present system, get alienated. The militant and extremist forces thrive in this environment. The rise of Left extremism is more due to these compulsions than on ideological grounds. There are media reports about the carving out of a corridor by the Left extremist forces from Nepal to Tamil Nadu. Even if there is no truth in these reports, the involvement of hostile external forces in support of the Left extremist forces to destabilise the country cannot be ruled out.

The mushrooming of armed 'Senas' on caste and ethnic lines in some parts of the country is a direct consequence of the polarisation of the society. This phenomenon has also affected the police and the administration in general. Loss of public confidence in the capacity of the state to protect their life and property is the primary cause of this dangerous development. Far from controlling them, a politicised and partisan police actually encourages this development. The tensions in some parts of the country, especially in the tribal areas, due to a perceived threat to their identity is not new, but the rise of so many violent movements is a relatively recent development. In the border states these movements become secessionist because of the support they receive from the hostile neighbouring states.

The rise of fundamentalist forces is posing the most serious threat to India's security. Fired with religious zeal these forces have created an entirely new situation. The intelligence agencies in our neighbourhood and the organisations, like Al Qaida, and Jaish-e-Mohammad, are encouraging the so-called 'Jehadis' to enter India from outside. After first targeting the border states they have now spread deep inside the country. These bands of fanatics are not only indulging in subversive activities, but are spreading the virus of fundamentalism among the Indian Muslims. The break-up of the Indian Union continues to be the main goal of Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy. Easy availability of deadly weapons with the subversive groups operating in India has created new dangers for India's security.

With the 'Golden Crescent', and the 'Golden Triangle' in India's neighbourhood, drug trafficking poses yet another threat to our security.

Drug syndicates are generating huge funds, a part of which is being used to give financial support to some of these subversive groups. The intelligence agencies like the ISI are recruiting a number of ‘carriers’ in drug trafficking as their agents. These agencies provide legal immunity for their criminal activities in their own country in addition to giving them financial and logistical support. Internal security challenges are not confined to any one area, but the North-East, Jammu and Kashmir, and the areas afflicted by Left extremism deserve special mention.

### **North-East**

The Naga leadership under Z.A. Phizo had challenged their integration into the Indian Union even before India became independent in 1947. The Naga insurgency started way back in the early 1950s. Since then the insurgencies in this region have multiplied and spread to many new areas. In this extremely diverse and strategically sensitive region, there are different reasons for the ethnic upsurges and insurgencies in different states. Some seek secession from the Indian Union, some others seek separate states and yet others greater autonomy within the existing state. The number of such insurgent groups could reach three-digit figures. In Manipur alone, more than twenty-five groups are operating. Thousands have died in the insurgency-related violence. Insurgencies have seriously affected the economic life of the region. The whole developmental process is seriously hampered because of this unending violence. One can imagine the plight of the people who are already living on the margin. What to talk of getting a share of the fruits of development, they are deprived even of the most basic services. Unfortunately, unlike Jammu & Kashmir, these violent movements do not stir much response in national consciousness. Even serious incidents of violence hardly find any mention in the so-called mainstream media. The geo-strategic importance of the North-East is not sufficiently appreciated even in the security establishment. All the states in the North-East share an international border with other countries and the seven North-Eastern states are linked to the rest of the country only by a narrow strip of land. The lack of physical, cultural and emotional links has encouraged a feeling of alienation, which is being exploited by the not-too-friendly neighbours to pursue their own agenda. They are giving support and sanctuaries to many of these groups to use them as leverage against a much bigger and more powerful neighbour.

The roots of these many insurgencies in the North-East lie deep in its history and its geography. But, it would be wrong to treat it as one homogeneous region with common problems, or social systems and customs. Even physiographically, the region can be divided into three broad areas — hills, plateaus, and plains. The many ethnic groups, speaking many different languages and dialects, who inhabit this remote part of the country consider themselves as separate people with little in common with the people in the rest of the country. The lack of physical, cultural and emotional links has encouraged this feeling of separation.

The partition of the country seriously dislocated the old system of communications with serious demographic consequences. At the heart of the problem, however, is the new political consciousness and an urge for asserting their identity, especially among the fiercely independent tribal communities. The partition left the entire region land-locked, and even the old road, railway and river-waterway links with the rest of the country were severed, because they all passed through East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The new rail link via North Bengal is circuitous and too long and expensive for easy access to the region. The air link is not only expensive, but also unreliable due to climatic conditions. The people have to bear enormous additional transport cost for all their supplies. Another intractable problem is created by the influx of migrants from East Pakistan and now continuing from Bangladesh. In the beginning it was confined to the Hindus leaving East Pakistan due to insecure conditions, but later, because of intense population pressure even Muslims started migrating. The fear that immigrant population will one day dominate them is keeping many of the insurgent and secessionist movements alive.

The terrain in this region is eminently suitable for insurgency. The hilly terrain and dense forests provide convenient hiding places to mount ambushes on the moving convoys of the security forces. Large parts of the interior areas have little or no police presence. The insurgent groups virtually control the administration in these areas. After attacking the security force they can easily disappear into the local population. Because of deprivation and alienation, a large section of the people tend to be sympathetic to the members of these groups. It is the alienation of the people that has sustained insurgency all these years, though logistic support and sanctuaries provided by the neighbouring states play a vital role in sustaining them. The dispersion of ethnic groups across the international

boundaries has profoundly influenced the nature of political conflicts. However, it needs to be emphasised that internal-external linkages originate with the failure of the domestic political and administrative system in coping with the internal conflicts.

Secessionist leaders often adopt alternative strategies to achieve their goal. They keep on changing their tactics and demands according to the ground situation. The intensity of the conflict depends very much on how strong the public support is. Ethnicity can become an important dimension of internal conflict when it becomes intertwined with other social, political and economic issues. As conflicting groups go from one crisis to the next, they learn by experience to raise their demands to increase their bargaining power. Political changes that offer new opportunities for personal gain and extending their influence can spark violent conflicts. Even though most of them are conscious of the fact that secession is not a viable option, they keep on raising this demand to bring together the various contending conflicts on one platform. Making common cause against the Indian state is how many of these groups with conflicting ideologies cooperate with each other in their fight against the Indian state. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was born out of the demand to throw out the migrants from Bangladesh, and yet its top leaders are today finding sanctuary in that country.

The South Asian countries have more in common with India than with other countries in the region. They do not even have a common boundary with each other. But this reality has not made them friendlier towards India. History and geography have encouraged negative sentiments rather than positive sentiments about India in these countries. The big powers too have not hesitated to fish in troubled waters. Till the 1970s, China was directly supporting the insurgencies in the North-East. Strategically, politically and economically the North-East is the most sensitive part of the country and should receive the serious attention it deserves.

The ongoing dialogue between the government and the NSCN (IM) is a positive development, but it is going to take a long and torturous route. The NSCN (IM)'s claim on the Naga-inhabited areas in the neighbouring states has created serious complications. The riots in Manipur in 2001 following the extension of the ceasefire to the areas beyond the boundaries of Nagaland are a pointer to the difficult road ahead. The situation in

Assam has shown some signs of improvement, but large-scale extortion by the ULFA and other groups is posing serious problems. The NLFT and the ATTF continue to be active in Tripura. They have sanctuaries in Bangladesh. Mizoram is quiet, but there are problems between the Mizos and the Chakmas, and the Mizos and the Reangs. Thousands of Reang refugees from Mizoram are staying in camps in Tripura. In spite of many rounds of negotiations between the Mizoram government and the representatives of the Reangs, so far no solution appears to be in sight. The unending internecine feud between the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) has spilled over from Nagaland to the neighbouring states and even to Myanmar. A number of Meitie and Kuki groups have sanctuaries in the Chin Hills in Myanmar. The ULFA and the Bodo groups have sanctuaries in the forests of Bhutan. There are unconfirmed reports of some sort of tie-up between the ULFA and the LTTE. A number of groups have also come up in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Many experts have called the Naga insurgencies as the mother of all insurgencies in the North-East. The level of violence, however, in this explosive region continues to be high in spite of the fact that the ceasefire agreement with the NSCN (IM) has been in place since 1997. This only goes to show how difficult the road to peace is going to be in this trouble-torn region.

It is truism to say that it is not only a law and order problem. It has many other dimensions. No strategy will succeed unless it strikes a right balance between political, economic and security measures. There is need for closer co-ordination among the policymakers. Ideally, there is need for a consensus among the major political parties. The pursuit of narrow political agenda can be exploited by the subversive groups. Many political leaders in this region indulge in double-speak. They mouth nationalist slogans in Delhi but have no hesitation in making strong anti-national statements and collaborating with the insurgent groups in the state. Nor do they have any reservation in changing parties. They frequently hop from one political party to another. In Manipur some politicians have changed sides as many as six times in a year. A chief minister changed his party three times in one month, and his coalition partners three times in 48 hours. A party label has very little meaning. Money and muscle power with active support of the insurgent groups play a key role in the elections.

Most of these states are not financially viable. They hardly collect any revenue and depend almost entirely on the Union government for financial

support. This has caused lack of responsibility in incurring public expenditure. For example, Manipur has created a huge bureaucratic structure with a workforce of almost 100,000 on its pay roll. Over 80% of its total revenue (both Plan and non-Plan) is spent on payment of salaries and pensions. Extortion by the insurgent groups, the leakage's of huge funds through corrupt practices leave very little for development. And they conveniently put the blame on the Centre for not giving them adequate funds. Through years of neglect this potentially rich region is today the most backward, almost primitive, part of our country. In these appalling conditions an alienated population becomes an easy target for the secessionist propaganda.

### **Jammu & Kashmir**

The problem has been with us since independence even though Pakistan has no legal case. The ruler of this erstwhile princely state decided to accede to India. According to the Independence Act it was for the rulers of the princely states to decide to join India or Pakistan. Pakistan has been disputing the legality of the accession signed by the then J&K ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh. The initial hesitation of the Maharaja to accede to either India or Pakistan and the unilateral Indian offer to find out the wishes of the people of the state has given Pakistan an excuse to challenge the legality of the accession. It has been doing everything for the last 56 years to grab this state. It has not been able to achieve its objective through wars with India. So, it has started a proxy war since 1989. Waging of a proxy war fits into the Pakistani designs of bleeding India. Unfortunately, the weaknesses of the state and of the administrative systems have provided Pakistan with opportunities to fish in troubled waters. More interested in perpetuating their rule than governing the state, its rulers have been exploiting regional and religious differences. Anti-national forces thrived in this environment and Pakistan has missed no opportunity to support and encourage them. Over the years it has succeeded in building a pro-Pakistan base in the state. Frustrated in their efforts to gain power through democratic means, some politicians joined the anti-India front, more to put pressure on the Indian government than on ideological grounds. In a state, where the overwhelming population was against communal politics at the time of partition, the fundamentalist forces have managed to penetrate into the secular polity. The many serious problems of the people have to be addressed. It is not a coincidence that Pakistan's efforts to destabilise

the situation in the state received some success only when our own political mismanagement provided it with an opportunity to intervene, as in 1965 and again in 1989. One of Pakistan's main aims is to divide the polity on communal lines.

The attitude of the Pakistani military government is unlikely to change in the near future. But that does not mean that Pakistan should be allowed to set the Kashmir agenda. Moves will have to be made on all fronts to regain the initiative on both political and diplomatic fronts. The proposals made in the announcements by the Cabinet Committee on Security on October 22 are steps in the right direction, but the ground situation does not justify over-optimism. There are likely to be many ups and downs on this long torturous road to peace in Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Left Extremism**

Making a beginning in Naxalbari in West Bengal and Telengana in Andhra Pradesh in the 1970s, the movement has since spread to many states: Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. The root cause for the rise in Left extremism is the inability of the states to address the many genuine grievances of the people. The gap between the unrealistic expectations, fuelled by populist rhetoric, and their actual fulfilment has increased and not decreased over the years. The younger generation is no longer willing to put up passively with injustice and humiliation without a fight. The bitterness of the angry young man against the prevailing unjust socio-economic system is spilling over. The older generation is not unsympathetic to them. An educational system which produces unemployable young boys and girls has not helped. Pressure on land has made the task of survival on agriculture more difficult. A callous district administration, especially in the rural areas, a clogged judicial system and feudal attitudes have compounded the problem. The land disputes have multiplied, but the land records and the judicial system to settle them is in disarray. There is a sense of frustration and anger.

The most prominent among the groups, that have mushroomed in the recent years, are the People's War Group (PWG) and the Marxist Communist Centre (MCC). But it is not ideology and revolutionary zeal that is driving them. For many, joining these groups is the only way to survive. Their main activity is extortion. Huge funds amounting to hundreds of crores of rupees are being extorted by them. What they cannot

get through legitimate means they obtain through arms and explosives. Their tactics are no different from the insurgents and terrorists. Create terror and extort money. They are, however, not secessionists. Their aim is to overthrow what they call an unjust socio-economic system. But they are in no hurry to achieve their ideological aims as long as they can extort enough money. Corrupt politicians, policemen and civil servants have made their own adjustments with these groups. A live-and-let live attitude is mutually beneficial to all of them. Who knows how much money goes to the extremists and how much goes to the others. The real sufferers are the very people for whom the extremists are waging this war against the state.

In public perception a government that is unable to discharge all its responsibilities is more likely to respond when the demand is loud, organised and backed by acts of violence. The many progressive, well-intentioned legislations are not being implemented effectively and sometimes have done more harm than good by creating more bitterness and frustration, e.g., the Minimum Wages Act. The marginal and deprived sections of the society are the worst hit.

Social and economic factors are important, but even more important are religion and identity. The secessionist movement in J&K is politically motivated, but its ideological base is built around religious fundamentalism. Fired by religious fervour, the young recruits have no hesitation in attacking ruthlessly what they consider the decayed political and moral order, which they perceive as hedonistic. Once the instruments of governance are discredited, it is not too difficult to justify their destruction as in J&K, the North-East or in the states afflicted by Left extremism. In another sense, however, the aim of all these movements is no different from the aim of legitimate political movements. They too seek to acquire power, measured in terms of exercising influence or control over the people and acquisition of wealth for them is the source of all power. Extortion, therefore, becomes an essential part of their strategy. Their goal and strategy could change during the course of the movement. In the initial stages some of them may only demand economic and political justice or more autonomy in the existing political system, like the Bodos in Assam, but they can take a more extremist stand and demand secession in the later stages.

Effective steps to reduce ethnic and social inequalities, disparities in educational and employment opportunities, and for creating an effective machinery for the redressal of public grievance, are absolutely essential to

improve the environment in which extremist violence flourishes. Steps to reduce economic deprivation and improve the delivery of essential services can erode the base of public support on which the extremist movements survive. It is relatively easier to find solutions to seemingly intractable political problems, like in J&K, in an environment where people are by and large satisfied with the functioning of the government agencies and are not deprived of essential services. More than anything else, it is the economic policies that would ultimately determine the future of these movements. A thriving economy, which gives hope and opportunity to the people, is more likely to defeat all types of extremist movements than any other strategy.

The need for a well co-ordinated security apparatus can hardly be over-emphasised. It should include the police, the paramilitary forces, the army and the intelligence agencies. A composite force on the lines of the National Security Guards (NSG) should be organised in all the states, even in those states where the internal security situation is not so serious. It is easier to deal with the problems at the initial stages, than later, when the state police is no longer able to cope with them.

But in the states where the situation has gone beyond their control, the Centre, as laid down in the Constitution, is duty-bound to intervene, notwithstanding the fact that law and order is under the State List. The Union government is charged with the responsibility of protecting the states from internal disturbances under Article 353 of the Constitution, even though law and order comes under List-II, the State List. The Union government can issue directions to the state under Articles 257-258. Action for non-compliance of the directions from the Union government can be taken under Article 365. A state government can be dismissed under Article 356, if a situation arises in which the administration of the state cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. A national emergency can be declared under Article 352.

But, even if the Centre decides to intervene, the state's role cannot be minimised. The primary responsibility to deal with the security challenges must rest with the state governments. A situation should not be allowed to develop where the state government washes its hands off, or its forces instead of cooperating with the central forces, actually work against them. The many internal security challenges can be met effectively only with full cooperation between the central and the state governments. The police,

the paramilitary forces, the army and all the intelligence agencies must act in close co-ordination. The hostile foreign forces can and will take advantage of the internal situation to destabilise the country in pursuit of their own agenda. All serious internal security problems: communal and sectarian violence, organised crime, drug-trafficking, labour and students' unrest, political violence and even economic crimes, if not checked effectively can develop an external dimension. There is an urgent need to make the police and the paramilitary forces more professional. The emphasis has to shift from 'more numbers' to 'more professionally trained forces'.

The internal security problems should not be treated as merely law and order problems. They have to be dealt with comprehensively in all their dimensions and at all levels — political, economic and social. They are all interlinked. At times, the required measures will conflict with each other. Going too far in one direction could be counter-productive. The security requirements have to be met, but that does not mean giving the security agencies a free hand. Striking the right balance is the key to success in meeting these challenges effectively. We need a comprehensive security policy that will be implemented effectively at all levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your indulgence. It has been my endeavour to offer a personal perspective on the nature of the internal security challenges that India currently faces. I hope these thoughts and observations would encourage greater deliberations amongst you. From this interaction we could perhaps distil a collective perspective that would be relevant both to the policy makers and the civil society. And finally, my best wishes to the entire IDSA fraternity on this occasion — and may your stature grow.