Internal Security: A Psychological Approach

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In the larger national strategic discourse, identifying and prioritising the internal security issues and challenges is very crucial. India has been grappling with multiple 'identity-centric' and 'grievance-driven' challenges that have impacted its security and national fabric for more than seven decades now. While there is no gainsaying that the country has been largely successful in managing these conflicts well below the threshold levels, a durable peace—a prerequisite for national security and development—is as elusive as ever in most of these conflicts.

India has followed a somewhat doctrinaire approach to deal with most of the pressing internal security threats. The state's (both at the centre and in the state) response to these multifaceted challenges has been predominantly characterised by 'ad hocism' and an inclination towards 'employing heavy kinetic force' to mitigate or control the visible impact of violence (p. 43). Thus, addressing just a façade of the threat and largely ignoring the underlying socio-psychological undercurrents that are inherent to internal security threats has gradually resulted in making these threats more complex, persistent and challenging over the years. Besides, an in-depth understanding and analysis of the psychological factors that provide momentum to insurgencies and sustain them for

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longer periods, despite armed repression, is imperative to reap the benefits of successful counter-insurgency (COIN) operations.

In this context, *Internal Security: A Psychological Approach* by Major General Sanjay Bhide (Retd), who has also served as Additional Director General of Military Operations (Special Operations), is a modest attempt to examine and reorient the existing discourse on traditional internal security challenges in India. Deviating from the popular perception/understanding that internal threats are rooted in inherent socio-economic and cultural disparities, the author tries to explore the hitherto ignored socio-psychological dimension of internal security challenges. It involves envisioning and analysing internal security issues from a unique vantage point, that is, social psychology. The book has six chapters, besides an 'introduction', three appendices and a 'postscript'. In the course of this study, the author draws extensively from his long stints in counterterrorist operations in the Kashmir Valley and suggests an operational model for 'psychological warfare and perception management' for effective handling of internal threats, leading to conflict resolution.

He notes that the majority of the internal security threats which India faces today are by-products of the centuries-old India's evolutionary process, from multitudes of 'nations' to a single sovereign 'state'. According to him, India has never been able to qualify as a 'state' owing to her inherent fault lines in the socio-political and economic domains. As a result, the conceptual dichotomy that persists between the narrative of a 'nation' and 'state' (p. 49) has led to the evolution of differing 'perceptions' and 'aspirations' within the 'individual'/group on what constitutes 'freedom', how one would like to be governed and how one should utilise the natural resources (pp. 16, 17). Such differing perceptions and growing aspirations within certain sections of population, coupled with the state's failure to reach out timely and address them appropriately, have paved the way for the deeply entrenched perceptions of 'deprivation' and 'self-value' (pp. 56, 57). Thus, it is actually the individual/group's belongingness to a 'nation' and the tenuous citizenship contract with the 'state' that acts as the principal source for the origin of all internal security threats. The hypothesis offered by Bhide stands logical and relevant in the larger contexts of Kashmir insurgency and multiple ethnic/tribal insurgencies in the North-East and tribal hinterland, which are essentially centred on the socio-psychological construct of narrow 'nationalism' and perception of 'We vs You' (p. 48). All these

developments are surreptitious and complex in nature as they typically play out in individual's mindset, consequently making it 'ripe to rebel' at the trigger of an incident.

The author underscores that the manifestation of an internal security threat is a long-drawn process in the potent psychological domain, involving individual alignments, group formation, group think and crowd psychology (pp. 62, 63). He emphasises that it is essentially the psychological domain where an exploitable weakness of any 'threat vector' is present. Accordingly, the focus of all security and developmental initiatives necessarily needs to be the individual, his perceptions, his aspirations and his experience and position as a citizen within the politico-socio-economic milieu (p. 75). His call for waging a psychological war to target the individual/group's perceptions (emerging internal threats) and aspirations, appears to be highly enthusiastic and far-fetched in the highly diversified and deeply fragmented Indian socio-political milieu.

The author also laments on the impact of flawed political structure and strategic culture in exacerbating the inherent vulnerabilities. The heavy obsession of political parties to wield power by, and through, catering to the 'aspirations' of only a certain section of society has resulted in deepening of the feeling of 'deprivation' among the others, thus contributing to greater polarisation among the society along various fault lines that already exist. In addition, he raises concerns over the capabilities and aptness of India's security architecture (at all levels) to deal with the multiple dimensions of internal threats. For instance, by placing all law and order issues (howsoever challenging they ought to be) within the realm of the states, the Indian Constitution has inadvertently contributed to ambiguity and dilemma in the security response. Such an ambiguity often allows the internal security threat to grow and fester under the nose of state government until it attains dangerous proportions and threatens the writ of the state. The author argues that by treating internal security threats as routine 'law and order' issues, the responses at the strategic, operational and tactical levels lack much-needed coherence and consistency as multiple players and their vested interests are at play while dealing with the potential threats (p. 36). A similar sort of strategic ambiguity and tactical inconsistency was largely evident while dealing with the threat of Maoist/left-wing extremist insurgency across the states. As a result, the insurgency gradually spread, festered and continues to pose grave security challenges despite the security offensives.

Bhide further argues that the response to counter any threat should primarily be driven in the psychological domain, targeting the enemy's 'centre of gravity', the mind (p. 106). To achieve the same, he calls for undertaking well-thought-of, planned and strategically driven psychological intervention operations/PSYOPs. As none of the Indian structures or organisations are equipped to understand and exploit the vital psychological domain, he proposes a conceptual framework for the evolution of 'whole-state psychological intervention' approach (p. 112), along with the psychological intervention (PI) model (p. 114). He also discusses the vision, goals and evolution of a PI strategy (p. 115). The whole-state PI approach entails to bring the entire strategic structure to nullify any threat under the umbrella of PI organisation. Accordingly, all elements of state power would thus work within the overall umbrella of PI strategy and evolve their respective objectives in a constant interplay and exchange with the PI strategic goals. The author underscores that the PI strategy and operational plan should target the perceptions of members of each of the populace layer (p. 66) and manipulate them towards conflict resolution (p. 124).

The proposed PI model, though a modest one, necessitates breaking and overcoming the existing silo mentality that has long crept in the security architecture at all levels. It also clamours for subordination of high standards, seamless coordination and unity of efforts by and among the various organs of state power and agencies, which is a challenging task given the country's political structure and the strategic environment that governs the functioning of various organisations and agencies engaged in national security. Nevertheless, it is important to have in place a holistic and well-thought-of PI strategy and plan for undertaking small and swift PSYOPs (in subordination to kinetic force operations) to dominate and exploit the vital information domain.

The author also reflects on the much-desired realignment and restructuring in the apex-level security institutions. A few of these recommendations are: giving teeth to the National Security Council (NSC) to monitor implementation of strategy and operational concepts by ensuring seamless coordination and functioning among all elements of national power; removing the dual control over the Joint Intelligence Committee and specifically tasking it to undertake psychological analysis of internal threats under the NSC; and creating a new Ministry of Internal Security by splitting the existing Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). The charter of the new ministry should focus on early detection,

analysis and prevention of any situation growing into a threat vector, including evolving and monitoring implementation of PI objectives and methods. The author has also suggested creating a department of 'Psy War and Perception Management' in the proposed Ministry of Internal Security. The same can be suitably empowered with legislative support and subjected to robust oversight mechanism (pp. 136, 137). Other functional organisations, such as National Investigation Agency, National Counter Terrorism Centre and Multi-Agency Centres, should be placed under the proposed Ministry of Internal Security.

The book also offers an interesting and well-researched case study of the Kashmir threat vector, which attempts to prove the entire thrust of Bhide's arguments as discussed in the preceding chapters. The author contends that the decades-old separatism in the Kashmir Valley has its genesis in the region's isolated geography and a long history of evolving culture, religion and prosecution by 'outsiders'. The same had led to the evolution of deep-rooted perception of 'We vs You' in the Kashmiri populace. This, combined with the perceived rigging of 1987 elections, Pakistan's meddling in the situation, the centre's inability to reach out to the populace and ineffective state institutions, has gradually resulted in the so-called 'ripe to rebel' mindset. This psychological construct, according to the author, has manifested in a dynamic process of group formation, individual alignments, group thinking and crowd psychology, as was largely evident during the violent street protests in the Valley in 2008, 2010 and 2016. Thus, from vocalising of demands to an armed uprising, the Kashmir threat vector has followed a long gestation period and a classical growth curve discussed by the author in earlier chapters. The author contends that the battle in the domain of 'perceptions' has never been figured in the Indian state response. He believes that the revocation of Article 370 and the accompanying division of the erstwhile state into the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh in August 2019 have, again, contributed to the virulent Kashmiri perception of India being an 'outsider'—a perception that is undesirable and detrimental to the nation's fabric and territorial integrity. He concludes by giving a call to wage and win the war in the domain of perceptions (manipulating 'perceptions' of Kashmiri populace and other internal security threats) for long-term conflict resolution.

The author accords utmost importance to the socio-psychological approach to perceive and tackle the complex internal security threats. Though a modest one, but it calls for exceptionally high standards of

political consciousness and consensus, improved centre–state relationship and synergy of actions, interdepartmental coordination and above all, the much-resisted change of 'mindset' to work together.

The book extensively gains from the author's personal experience in leading counterterrorist operations in the Kashmir Valley and is policy relevant. With a catchy dust jacket, neat print and simple and effective prose, the book is well written. It is complemented with tables, flowcharts, figures and maps to facilitate the readers' comprehension. It will also make an excellent reading for all inquisitive readers, especially for students of national security. It should ideally become a part of the reading list of various universities, military/police academics, administrators and national security organs.