

People Power

Growth with Security

Once again, cowardly and murderous terrorist groups attacked India's financial capital. Once again, the citizens of Mumbai, in the midst of the shock and grief, have exhibited uncommon courage, resilience and tolerance. As in April 1993, in July 2006, all of India showed how a great nation could transcend prejudice and bigotry, and uphold its liberal, humane traditions.

But the hurt and anger remain, and they need to be channelized constructively and creatively to secure the nation against future dangers. The economic consequences of terrorism are obvious. Direct loss of life, limb and property cause great misery. Disruption of economic activity on account of infrastructure breakdown undermines growth. The psychological impact of terrorism, fear and insecurity could dampen investment, depress capital markets, damage work ethic and lead to gloom and pessimism. The swift and demonstrable return to normal life in Mumbai is the best answer to the terrorists and their foreign backers.

The Prime Minister echoed the sentiments of the nation while paying wholesome tributes to the citizens of Mumbai and Srinagar and asserting that India would defeat the merchants of death and destruction by our resolve and defiance. Leader of Opposition rose above politics and focused on unity and national purpose.

These murderous bombings once again show that sleeper cells in Indian cities can be activated at will to unleash horror and destruction. While these cells may be ultimately controlled from Pakistan, the links are increasingly complex, involving several tiers within India, and Bangladesh, Nepal, UAE , Gulf region and Europe. The telecommunications revolution and globalization have given enormous advantages to the terrorist outfits, just as they have accelerated growth and promoted prosperity.

The recent spurt in terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir and the Mumbai blasts show that our national security capabilities need strengthening. In particular, we need to focus on three areas. First, the intelligence and security infrastructure to fight terrorism needs to be strengthened. In a highly globalized, technologically sophisticated world, this would need greater access to technology, and highly trained, adequate manpower. Investment in these may be expensive in the short term, but could prevent far greater losses later. Our total security related expenditure is about 4% of GDP now. More expenditure would mean diversion of precious resources; but being penny-wise could greatly enhance the risks to our national security and economy. It would be sensible to invest in smart technologies and excellent training instead of massive expansion and visible presence of security forces. Equally important is effective integration and coordination among the many security agencies – R & AW, Military Intelligence, State intelligence wings, and all police forces.

Second, the intelligence agencies need to be given the freedom and flexibility to operate effectively. Democratic accountability should not mean tying up intelligence and security forces in procedural bottle necks. Recruitment of personnel on short-term basis in India or abroad would be necessary from time to time. The heads of intelligence agencies need the freedom to act swiftly and secretly. Similarly, procurement procedures need to be relaxed to suit intelligence requirements. Obviously the IB cannot procure high quality surveillance equipment or other sophisticated gadgets through advertising, open tendering or display of specifications on the web! The authority to discretely purchase state-of-the art equipment to suit our special requirements is vital in order not to alert terrorist outfits and hostile powers. Many such procedures need to be streamlined, with suitably amended processes of accountability, to enhance the capacity of security agencies to cope with growing challenges.

Third, we need to revisit the legal framework which exists to combat terrorism and other threats to national security. Many jurists and security experts argue that the normal criminal laws are not adequate to bring terrorists to book. Witnesses are silenced by fear of reprisals; judges and their families are threatened with violence and retribution; and rules of evidence and standard of proof required to establish guilt have become tools in the hands of terrorists to escape the clutches of law. Foreign nationals determined to undermine our unity and security cannot be allowed to use our constitutional freedoms against us. The imperatives of national security have to be acknowledged and recognized while making laws to combat terrorism. It is better to have strong laws enforced justly and humanely, than to have weak laws forcing the security agencies to act extra-legally. The money laundering law is widely regarded as toothless, and needs to be strengthened so that the international supply chains of terrorists can be cut off.

Finally, domestic political rivalries should not be allowed to come in the way of national security. The union government must be seen to be firmly in command, and its authority needs to be respected whichever be the party in power. A perception of weakness or lack of cohesion will only embolden terrorists. Our democratic system has been our greatest asset to national security, and unrestrained squabbles should not be allowed to weaken the country. Similarly the Union and States should work, and be seen to be working, in concert. For instance, SIMI network is suspected to be involved along with LeT in the Mumbai blasts. And yet UP government is said to be reluctant to extend the ban on SIMI. Such discord can only harm the country.

In the ultimate analysis, our security is guaranteed only when all segments of society share in prosperity, and have common stakes in the future. Alienation breeds resentment and violence. Harmony in society and opportunities for all are the best safeguards for the future. Meanwhile, the threats of foreign-sponsored terrorism cannot be underestimated. We need to do whatever it takes to eliminate such threats. Only then freedom, peace and growth can be assured.

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