

# IDSA

## *Policy Brief*

# Pulwama Attack: Time to Get the Messaging Right

*Vivek Chadha*

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## *Summary*

It needs little emphasis that battles are fought not merely in the operational domain, but in the psychological domain as well. This is where strategic communications play an important role. India does not have a ministry for focussing on this critical element of countering hybrid wars. Unlike a number of areas which need specialisation, political leaders, by virtue of their experience, are best suited to undertake this endeavour. It is time that this facet receives their direct and immediate attention.

Suicide attacks are one of the most potent and effective options available to terrorists.<sup>1</sup> They have been used with telling effect in conflict torn areas like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. The frequency of suicide attacks in India has been lower. However, whenever this option has been employed by Pakistani terrorist groups in the last few years, the security forces have invariably been the target.<sup>2</sup> The February 14 attack on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy moving from Jammu to Srinagar, near Awantipura, Pulwama, should be seen in this context.

There is a distinct similarity in the response to such attacks from the Indian state and civil society. The immediate aftermath of such attacks is marked by an inadvertent misrepresentation of the source of terrorist attacks. The attack itself is often described in a way that reinforces the message that terror groups seek to convey. Public debates tend to demand extreme military and diplomatic measures, irrespective of whether these can be realistically executed. There is also an upsurge in articulation of popular support for the security forces, often with a limited shelf-life.

These limitations adversely affect the messaging that emanates after each major attack, thus weakening the intended impact of India's response. The criticality of ensuring coherence in India's strategic communications relates to the nature of challenge faced by the country and its evolving character over the years.

India has lost more security forces personnel in Jammu and Kashmir over the last three decades than in any single war fought against adversaries. What is being witnessed in that state and in some other parts of the country is not the handiwork of a few disgruntled youth. On the contrary, it is a protracted, well-planned, and coordinated hybrid war waged by the Pakistan Army. Unlike conventional wars of the kind fought in 1971 or even in 1999, the prolonged character of hybrid conflicts induces a sense of complacency. Once such conflicts achieve a degree of normality, it becomes business as usual. While the security forces continue with the tough job of a 24 by 7 vigil, strategic communications to build the Indian narrative and counter that of Pakistan tends to become diffuse and at times even counterproductive.

## **Strategic Communications**

Strategic communication can be described as the act of communicating a message to achieve the desired national objectives. Messaging in this case can often go beyond words and can be conveyed through actions as well. As an illustration, India's no-first-use nuclear policy and a massive retaliation in response to the employment of nuclear weapons by an adversary is an element of strategic messaging. Similarly, the political leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Yoram Schweitzer, Aviad Mendelboim and Adi Gozlan, "[Suicide attacks in 2018: Fewer attacks and victim in fewer countries](http://www.inss.org.il/publication/suicide-attacks-2018-fewer-attacks-victims-fewer-countries/)", *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, January 07, 2019, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/suicide-attacks-2018-fewer-attacks-victims-fewer-countries/> (Accessed February 16, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the Pulwama attack, the attacks at Sunjwan and Uri are other recent examples.

taking ownership of the surgical strikes conducted in 2016 was an element of strategic communication.

There are five key elements in strategic communications that we need to focus on:

**First: These are not “fidayeen” but *hashishin* suicide attackers.**

Suicide attackers are often inappropriately termed as “fidayeen”.<sup>3</sup> This term has been in wide circulation despite the fact that it unwittingly repeats the narrative of the terrorists. To elaborate: The term “fidayeen” is used to make a contrived association between terrorist actions and service to God. This association is all the more important for the terrorists’ strategic messaging since suicide is considered a sin in Islam.

In order to obviate this negative religious connotation, Hassan-i-Sabbah, a 11<sup>th</sup> century missionary based in the mountainous region of Alborz, termed his suicide attackers as “fidayeen”, thereby attempting to give his killers a degree of religious acceptability. However, in reality, their action of assassinating targets was undertaken in a drug induced state.

This practice continues to manifest itself in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> Not only do some suicide attackers act under the influence of drugs, the funding that supports their organisational network, training, weapons procurement, and remuneration for their families, are all sourced in part from the drug trade.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, for a terrorist network which operates with the support of the drug trade and suicide attackers who act under the influence drugs, there is no better description than *hashishin*.

**Second: Pulwama is the handiwork of Pakistan Army and not Jaish-e-Mohammed**

There must be no doubts about the ultimate source of the Pulwama terrorist attack in particular and terrorism in general. It lies in Pakistan.

The attack at Pulwama is not the brainchild of Masood Azhar, his nephew, or their ilk. The JeM only carried out this strike. Groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and JeM have become the sword arm of the Pakistan Army, and are employed as part of the latter’s hybrid war against India. By laying the blame at the doorstep of JeM in this case or of the LeT in others, we are only diluting the responsibility of the actual perpetrator of terrorism.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Vivek Chadha, “How we got trapped in Pakistan and LeT’s dirty propaganda on terrorists”, *DailyO*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/pakistan-fidayeen-hashishin-terrorism-let/story/1/16908.html> (Accessed February 15, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See “J&K: Shadow of the fidayeen”, *Media Centre, Ministry of External Affairs*, July 30, 2003, <https://mea.gov.in/articles-in-indian-media.htm?dtl/13297/JK+Shadow+of+the+fidayeen>, (Accessed on February 19, 2019). Similar inputs of suicide attacks in a drug induced state have been received through first person accounts by the author from officers involved in operations in J&K.

<sup>5</sup> Vicky Nanjappa, “Drug trade/smuggling finances Pakistan’s anti-India regiment”, *Rediff.com*, August 09, 2013, <https://www.rediff.com/news/report/slide-show-1-drug-tradesmuggling-finances-pakistans-anti-india-regiment/20130808.htm#1>, (Accessed on February 20, 2019).

Pakistan has realised that conventional military options of the kind employed in 1965, 1971 and 1999 have become part of a redundant toolset and that the best approach to adopt towards India is the employment of terrorism in conjunction with other elements. These other elements include firing along the Line of Control (LoC), subversion of Kashmir's population, and pumping fake currency notes into India. Thus, what we are witnessing in J&K and other parts of India is a form of hybrid war.<sup>6</sup>

### **Third: Disharmony in India is an asset for Pakistan**

The people of a vibrant democracy will often express diverse opinions on an issue. However, when this diversity of views reflects disharmony instead, it becomes an asset for an adversary looking to exploit fissures within the target society. The concern relates primarily to the nature and character of reactions that tend to emanate in the immediate aftermath of an incident. This impacts India at two levels.

One, the rise of hysteria after every major incident creates pressure on the government to not only act immediately, but also visibly. Acting thus may or may not necessarily be the best military option at that point in time. The government must have the time and space to analyse the situation and plan its response without unnecessary pressure. Two, a hybrid campaign is not one that the state machinery alone can counter. Non-state institutions like the media and even the people at large also need to play a part. While this does not preclude soul-searching and constructive criticism, there is a time and place for the same. Divisive voices, infighting on issues of national security, and politicking to score short-term gains achieve little besides strengthening the adversary. The messaging that it generates about India is that of a country divided by parochial interests. The security forces which prepare to come to terms with their losses and pay back the enemy in the same coin are disillusioned by such actions.

In the specific case of J&K, it needs to be reinforced that the armed forces employ a supportive local population base as a force multiplier while undertaking any military option. Actions that further alienate this segment of society can only have an adverse impact on the conduct of operations within the state and beyond. A simple question must therefore be asked every time knee-jerk reprisals aimed at a wide cross-section of the state's population are advocated: Are these people responsible for what has happened and will this action further the interests of the country and the security forces?<sup>7</sup>

It is often forgotten that intelligence is the basis for the successful conduct of counter-terror operations. And the most important source of intelligence remains the local population. If the security forces have managed to neutralise 257 terrorists in J&K in 2018, this could not have happened without the support of the local people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Vikrant Deshpande (ed.), *Hybrid Warfare: The Changing Character of Conflict*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> See Syed Ata Hasnain, "The challenge in the Pulwama attack", *The Hindu*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-challenge-in-the-pulwama-attack/article26298200.ece>, (Accessed February 19, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> "257 terrorists killed in Jammu and Kashmir in 2018, highest in 10 years: DGP", *Business Standard*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/257->

While undertaking strategic communications on a sustained basis, it is often forgotten that the effectiveness of messaging is not merely aimed at the most vocal and strident voices from an area. There is also a silent majority, which cannot afford to make itself heard, yet this segment remains instrumental for the successful conduct of operations. When short-sighted actions taken in anger communicate ill-will towards a community, it strengthens the strident vocal minority and questions the actions of the silent and supportive majority.

The population at large also derives little confidence from a sense of disunity. Therefore, the reality and perception of a house divided is a disservice to the ends of national security.

#### **Fourth: Messaging to remain effective must be backed up by action**

The value of a message lies in its implementation. Messaging that has immediate relevance and a narrative that strings together a number of these messages must all be validated by firm and decisive action.

Often, impulsive and exuberant words that do not form a part of a cogent narrative dilute the impact of actions. In this regard, both overstating and understating intentions and actions need to be avoided. While overstatement dents the state's credibility, understatement can lead to a loss of confidence in its ability. If exceptional circumstances present the need for understating or overstating intentions and actions, a decision in this regard must be taken at the highest level.

#### **Fifth: Selection of platform, target and the desired end state should guide strategic communications**

Strategic messaging is not a one-size-fits-all instrument. Its impact on Pakistan, its armed forces and the Pakistani people should be distinctive. Similarly, narratives have to be planned and executed on the basis of their potential impact on the Indian population and the armed forces as well as the international audience.

Pakistan's exploitation of the social media to build subversion in Kashmir is an example of exploiting a medium that is considered the most effective for reaching out to the youth. Similarly, the employment of a special emissary like Brajesh Mishra during the Kargil conflict by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to convey India's intent and bottom line to the United States is yet another instance. In a more recent case, the decision to go public with the surgical strike in 2016 was aimed at building national morale and instilling a sense of uncertainty within the Pakistan Army. It also broke the myth of India not having offensive options to deal with terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

Besides these instances, the television, print and electronic media represent very different platforms that can be utilised according to their primary audience and consumption patterns. However, the sum total of these endeavours must always add up to help achieve the ultimate objective of a campaign.

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[terrorists-killed-in-jammu-and-kashmir-in-2018-highest-in-10-yrs-dgp-118123100898\\_1.html](#), (Accessed on February 19, 2019).

In the present case of responding to the Pulwama attack, action needs to be taken at six levels:

One, emphasise on Pakistan being the principal perpetrator of the crime and the permanent villain of the piece. Groups like the JeM and LeT are temporary use-and-throw instruments for Pakistan. This messaging is not only important for the Indian audience to understand, but it is equally relevant for decision makers in the various capitals of the world.

Pakistan has carefully exploited the cracks within this landscape to perpetuate a false narrative about “freedom fighters” and “non-state actors”. The fact of the matter is that neither the JeM nor the LeT recruit their cadres from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Instead, their cadres come from Pakistani Punjab. This reality reinforces the fact that terrorism in India is the handiwork of Pakistani terror groups, acting as instruments of the state. These are not aggrieved Kashmiris fighting for their freedom, as is often made out by Pakistani propaganda.

These myths have unfortunately not been challenged by India and the international community adequately. The falsehood not only deserves to be busted, but also contextualised in relation to the direct control exercised by the Pakistan Army over these groups, irrespective of the number of times their names are changed.

Two, convey an unambiguous message that India is determined to undertake resolute but measured action. In case such actions are not envisaged, it is best to avoid mentioning them.

Three, mobilise the international community to help place Pakistan in the dock. This includes action by international bodies like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which is presently investigating Pakistan’s implementation of recommendations against terrorist groups like the JeM and LeT. Given its poor record of implementation, Pakistan is already on the Grey List of the FATF.<sup>9</sup> India needs to further strengthen the case against Pakistan’s continued direct involvement in employing terrorism as state policy through evidence that is being collected after the Pulwama attack. This step gains special significance in light of the ongoing FATF meeting, which will evaluate the actions taken by Pakistan on the observations raised by the multinational body with regard to its inadequacies in the fight against terrorism.

Four, convey to the people of Pakistan that India’s fight is against the perpetrators of terrorism and not the common citizens of their country. This larger message must also be accompanied by emphasising upon the negative fallout of the actions of the Pakistan Army including the adverse impact on the Pakistani economy and society as well as the futility of a self-defeating conflict that is based on a contrived narrative perpetuated by the men in uniform.

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<sup>9</sup> “Pakistan placed on FATF’s ‘grey list’”, *The Hindu*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-placed-on-fatfs-grey-list/article24277229.ece> (Accessed February 16, 2019).

Five, Indian security forces deserve empathy and respect for what they do. However, the rush of statements in their favour in the wake of terrorist attacks must also be backed by substantive governmental actions. This includes empowering the security agencies with state-of-art weapons, equipment and supporting mechanisms. Else, the messaging of this sentiment becomes redundant in the absence of the necessary wherewithal needed by the forces to effectively implement their mandate.

Six, it is often the most complicated endeavour to reach out to the varied shades represented by the average citizen. It will therefore remain a challenge to assuage their feelings and at the same time build their confidence. In such cases, it is best to state the facts, stick to the truth and ensure transparency within the framework of security parameters. The unity of our political class, a tempered response by the media and the maturity of strategic commentators all facilitate such an endeavour.

At the end of the day, there is a need to maintain a balance between overt action that reinforces national morale and a long-term strategic outlook that builds capabilities for enhancing the requisite leverage against the adversary. Pakistan's hybrid war is a reality. India's efforts need to be oriented towards countering such a war.

## **Conclusion**

It needs little emphasis that battles are fought not merely in the operational domain, but in the psychological domain as well. This is where strategic communications play an important role. India does not have a ministry for focussing on this critical element of countering hybrid wars. Unlike a number of areas which need specialisation, political leaders, by virtue of their experience, are best suited to undertake this endeavour. It is time that this facet receives their direct and immediate attention. Suffice it to say, this must remain a close affiliate to the apex level of governance and include representatives from ministries that play a more immediate role. As for the media and strategic commentators alike, it is time for introspection.

## About the Author



**Vivek Chadha** is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses, New Delhi.

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Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses  
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg  
New Delhi 110 010 India  
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191  
contact.idsa@nic.in www.idsa.in  
Twitter @IDSAIndia  
www.facebook.com/InstituteForDefenceStudiesAnalyses