**Countering the Indian threat**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2020-12-23

FOREIGN MINISTER Shah Mahmood Qureshi has yet again warned of an Indian plan to launch a `surgical strike` on Pakistan. It is not for the first time that we have been cautioned about India`s aggressive designs. But the tenor of Mr. Qureshi at a press conference in UAE on the issue was extremely alarming. He said that India was already seeking `tacit approval` from its allies for such action.

It is indeed a very serious development. Given India`s growing bellicosity a military misadventure by its forces cannot be ruled out. But a `surgical strike` has different connotations. The term is used for a military attack which is intended to damage a `legitimate military target, with no or minimal collateral damage`.

In fact, over the last few years the Modi government has used this rhetoric in its attempt to legitimise its cross-border military incursions. India claimed to have carried out some so-called surgical strikes across the Line of Control. While the Indian boast of a 2016 strike (denied by Pakistan) following an attack on an army camp in Uri in India-held Kashmir proved to be preposterous, the February 2019 incursion was a humiliation for the Indians. It was for the first time since the 1971 war that Indian air force jets violated Pakistani territory.

For a Pakistani leader to describe an Indian plan of blatant military aggression as a `surgical strike` is beyond one`s comprehension. Surely the foreign minister did not realise what the term might convey, but in diplomacy one needs to be extremely careful about the nuances. It is indeed a grave situation and one that needs to be handled more seriously.

Of course, we need to alert the international community about the threat but not through frequent press conferences and Twitter messages from the country`s top leadership, which could dilute the seriousness of the threat as communicated to the rest of the world. Sure, we need to be more proactive on the diplomatic front but we also require certain skills to effectively convey the message, as pressing the panic button all the time would raise questions about the leadership`s preparedness to deal with the threat. One expects that after our robust response to the Indian incursion in February 2019, we are confident of our capabilities to deal with any act of aggression. But shouting ourselves hoarse could be perceived by some as a sign of weakness.

There is no doubt about Modi`s aggressive designs. There has been a marked escalation by the Indian forces along the Line of Control that has caused large civilian casualties as well. Last week, Indian shells hit a vehicle carrying a UN observer ream. Pakistani officials maintain that they have obtained `very specific and reliable intelligence` of Indian plans to launch strikes.

Failing to contain the unrest in occupied Kashmir, the Indian government is now raising the false flag of cross-border infiltration of militants.

It is an old Indian tactic to justify its military escalation. The Indian military build-up along the Line of Control has increased the threat of a possible military misadventure by the Modi government.

Meanwhile, there has also been a marked escalation in India`s covert war in troubled Balochistan.

Last month, Pakistan shared an intelligence dossier with the international community which it said contained evidence of Indian sponsorship of armed elements operating on Pakistani soil.

Allegations of Indian involvement in terrorist attacks in Pakistan have been made in the past too. But the audio recordings and documents about specific attacks, armed groups and armed groups` leaders provide fresh and more substantive evidence of deep penetration of Indian intelligence.

The ongoing Indian covert war inside Pakistan is a part of Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval`s doctrine of the so-called `offensive defence` that seeks to take the battle inside the country.

But any military incursion into Pakistan would be a risky gamble by the Indian prime minister.

Such reckless action would also be in danger of spiralling out of control and turning into a full-blown military conflagration. The underlying calculation of Modi`s escalation is that India can afford this brinkmanship given the country`s diplomatic clout.

But it is hard to believe that any blatant act of aggression will go unnoticed. The f ailed February incursion was an attempt by the Modi government to redefine its nuclear threshold. New Delhi has also been pursuing a strategy of what is described as `vertical and horizontal` escalation. It is meant to test Pakistan`s capability to respond without crossing the threshold. But Pakistan`s strong response last year to the February incursion by India raises serious question about the effectiveness of Modi`s doctrine.

Domestic political factors too have had a role in Modi`s calculus while upping the ante. His bellicosity against Pakistan has helped him sweep the last elections and it is a major plank in his Hindu nationalist narrative. Yet another reason behind Modi`s escalation is the desire to divert the world`s attention f rom the popular uprising against Indian atrocities in occupied Kashmir. But there is also a question whether India with its economy in deep trouble because of the Covid-19 pandemic can af ford military adventurism.

A major challenge for Pakistan, however, is how to respond to the Indian bellicosity. There is no doubt that Pakistan`s armed forces are fully capable of effectively countering any Indian military adventurism. But foreign aggression cannot be defeated by military means alone. The country`s major vulnerabilities are its weak economy and perpetual political instability.

There is a need for building a broad consensus on key national security issues. Lack of clarity on various dimensions of national security is, in f act, a failure of our national leadership. It is mainly the responsibility of the prime minister to provide leadership in this situation.

Instead of taking parliament into confidence on the Indian escalation the political leadership has relied more on media and tweets to inform the nation about the impending threat. Our diplomatic efforts have also been hampered by the lack of a robust foreign policy. We need a more proactive approach to meeting the serious security challenge while refraining from creating panic. The writer is an author and journalist.

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