

EASTASIAFORUM

Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

- [Home](#)
- [Topics](#)
 - [Development](#)
 - [Economics](#)
 - [International relations](#)
 - [Politics](#)
 - [Trade](#)
 - [Year in review](#)
 - [2017 in review](#)
 - [2016 in review](#)
 - [2015 in review](#)
 - [2014 in review](#)
 - [2013 in review](#)
 - [2012 in review](#)
 - [2011 in review](#)
 - [2010 in review](#)
 - [2009 in review](#)
 - [2008 in review](#)
 - [Other Topics](#)
 - [Editorials](#)
 - [ASEAN](#)
 - [Belt and Road Initiative](#)
 - [Climate change](#)
 - [China–Japan relations](#)
 - [Democracy](#)
 - [G20](#)
 - [Human rights](#)
 - [Military](#)
 - [Regional architecture](#)
 - [Security](#)
 - [South China Sea](#)
 - [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#)
 - [United States and Asia](#)
 - [US–Japan alliance](#)
 - [WTO](#)
- [Countries](#)
 - [Map Article Browser](#)
 - [Australia](#)
 - [China](#)
 - [India](#)
 - [Indonesia](#)
 - [Japan](#)
 - [North Korea](#)
 - [South Korea](#)
 - [United States](#)
 - [Other countries](#)
 - [Central Asia](#)
 - [Kyrgyzstan](#)
 - [Tajikistan](#)
 - [Turkmenistan](#)
 - [Uzbekistan](#)

- [East Asia](#)
 - [Hong Kong](#)
 - [Mongolia](#)
 - [Taiwan](#)
- [European Union](#)
- [Oceania](#)
 - [Fiji](#)
 - [New Zealand](#)
 - [Pacific islands](#)
 - [Papua New Guinea](#)
 - [Solomon Islands](#)
 - [Timor-Leste](#)
 - [Tonga](#)
 - [Vanuatu](#)
- [South Asia](#)
 - [Afghanistan](#)
 - [Bangladesh](#)
 - [Bhutan](#)
 - [Maldives](#)
 - [Nepal](#)
 - [Pakistan](#)
 - [Sri Lanka](#)
- [Southeast Asia](#)
 - [Cambodia](#)
 - [Laos](#)
 - [Malaysia](#)
 - [Myanmar](#)
 - [Philippines](#)
 - [Singapore](#)
 - [Thailand](#)
 - [Vietnam](#)
- [Russia](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Quarterly](#)
- [About](#)
- ☐

India gets the message all wrong after Myanmar foray

2 July 2015

Author: Arun Vishwanathan, NIAS, Bangalore

Recent events along the Indo–Myanmar border have proven that India’s Narendra Modi government has a different playbook when it comes to pro-active responses against groups that harm Indian national interests.

On 4 June, the Indian Army suffered its worst casualties in almost a decade when 18 soldiers were [killed](#) and 14 injured in an attack by insurgents belonging to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland’s Khaplang faction ([NSCN-K](#)) in Chandel district, Manipur. The Indian government was quick to respond by launching a special forces operation in the early hours of 9 June. Operation Peace led to attacks on [insurgent](#) camps belonging to the [NSCN-K](#).

While operations across or along the Indo–Myanmar border are nothing new for the Indian military, the government made two significant departures from the norm. The swift Indian response came less than a week after the ambush of the Indian soldiers in Manipur and was approved at the [highest levels](#) of the Indian government.

The government also broke its cardinal rule of 'silence' following special-forces operations. While the initial Indian Army statement cloaked the operation in ambiguity and reported that it was carried out along the border, Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore [told media](#) that the 'surgical strikes had been carried out a few kilometres inside Myanmar'.

Zaw Htay, the director of the office of Myanmar President Thein Sein, also [acknowledged](#) the fact that the operation was carried out inside Myanmar. This is not surprising given that both countries have been [jointly](#) carrying out coordinated operations since 1986. In 2010, India and Myanmar signed an [agreement](#) allowing Indian forces to pursue insurgents across the border. This was followed by a memorandum of understanding [signed](#) in May 2014 that provided for coordinated patrolling and intelligence sharing.

India's decision to own up to the operations was a political one. Rathore's statement was a calculated strategy to signal India's intent. The [statement](#) that 'India would carry out surgical strikes at the time and place of our choosing against any future attacks against Indians' was directed at Pakistan without specifically naming the country. This was followed up with another statement by Union Minister [Prakash Javadekar](#) that the operation 'speaks volumes about India's resolve to fight terror. This is a lesson and a message to all the terror groups that India will not hesitate in going beyond its geographical borders to eliminate terrorists'.

But having let the proverbial cat out of the bag, the Indian government failed to shape the media narrative. Following these statements, the successful military operation caused a frenzy on [news channels](#) and [social media](#). The race for viewership resulted in the casualty figures being [inflated](#) from 15–20 to about 100 and circulation of [fake pictures](#) of the army personnel allegedly involved in the cross-border raids.

The media hype has come at a cost. Owning up to Indian involvement blew the cover of plausible deniability, went [against standard operating procedures](#) and ultimately put Naypyidaw on the back foot. Going back on the earlier statement, Myanmar then [denied](#) that Indian forces had entered its territory. During Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to Myanmar on 17 June, Naypyidaw [turned down](#) India's proposal for joint operations against NSCN-K cadres.

The Indian government's failure to ensure a flow of reliable information and poor media management put avoidable pressure on an ally, [damaged](#) a bilateral relationship carefully cultivated over decades and [squandered](#) a moment of success.

Given the [possibility of successful negotiations](#) between the Indian government and the [NSCN faction led by Isak Swu and T. Muivah](#) (NSCN-IM), the Indian military's offensive against the Khaplang faction has stoked fears of revenge [attacks](#) by the group in cooperation with other insurgent groups. The prevailing situation and the Indian military offensive could result in increased attacks against Indian security forces in the future.

The entire episode has raised hackles in Pakistan with statements from [Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif](#) and other [political](#) and [military leaders](#). Pakistani generals warned India against carrying out any similar 'misadventure' in Pakistan. If the Indian government were to launch a surgical strike into Pakistan in the future, the Indian military will come up against an adversary on the guard. India's leaders have unwittingly made an already difficult task much more arduous.

Following the Indian ministers' statements, the media went overboard with unwarranted comparisons between the successful operation in Myanmar and future operations in Pakistan. Such comparisons are akin to comparing chalk and cheese.

In Myanmar, Indian forces were working alongside a cooperative ally and targeting Indian insurgent groups. A special-forces operation against Pakistan-based anti-India terrorist groups would face stronger defences and a Pakistani military determined to thwart Indian efforts. India will also have to ponder how to contain the possible escalation of the operations into a potentially wider conflict.

If India's intent was to signal New Delhi's resolve in tackling any future anti-India attacks, the Indian Army's initial statement would have been good enough. After taking a risky political decision to launch the special-forces operation into Myanmar, the Indian government took another calculated risk in publicly signalling its resolve in responding proactively to any future attacks on Indian interests. But it did little to actively handle the flow of reliable information, allowing the media to run riot.











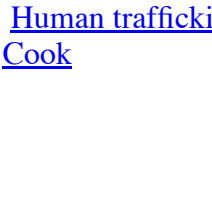
While the military succeeded in achieving its objectives, India's political leadership failed to capitalise on the opportunity to effectively put across a larger message. This misstep whittled down a well-deserved military success and ended up straining two important bilateral relationships.

Arun Vishwanathan is an assistant professor at the [International Strategic and Security Studies Programme](#), National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. He tweets @ArunVish_



0

View more posts by [Arun Vishwanathan](#) [Print This Post](#) [Download PDF](#)
RELATED POSTS

- 
[Fighting insurgency on the India–Myanmar border](#) by [Rahul Mishra](#)
- 
[It's time for India to rethink its nuclear policy.](#) by [Pushan Das](#)
- 
[Can India be a game changer in Afghanistan?](#) by [Frederic Grare](#)
- 
[Myanmar's Rohingya plight faces jihadist hijacking](#) by [Iftekhharul Bashar](#)
- 
[Hasina defrosting India–Bangladesh ties](#) by [Sumit Kumar](#)
- 
- [India and Pakistan compete for influence in Afghanistan](#) by [Sajjad Ashraf](#)
- 
[How will India respond to civil war in Pakistan?](#) by [Sunil Dasgupta](#)
- 
[India's challenges in Afghanistan post-2014](#) by [Rupakjyoti Borah](#)
- 
[Why India needs to 'act' East](#) by [Tridivesh Singh Maini](#)
- 
[As the trade war rages, China's economic tightrope tremors...](#) by [Sara Hsu](#)
- 
[Human trafficking in Asia going online](#) by [Alistair D. B. Cook](#)

What Other People Are Reading

2 Comments

[Post a comment](#)

East Asia Forum

welcomes comments, both for adding depth to analysis and for bringing up important new issues. Original

EASTASIAFORUM

[Passports a ticket to corruption in the Pacific Islands](#) by [Anthony van Fossen](#)



[The long march to the mixed economy in China](#) by [He Fan](#)

EASTASIAFORUM

comments adding insight and contributing to analysis are especially encouraged.



[Can Vietnam weather Trump's trade storm?](#) by [Suiwah Leung](#)

The editors retain the right to refuse and edit comments at any time.

Your email address will not be published.

[Is gender inequality really so low in the Philippines?](#) by [Fiona MacPhail](#)

Required fields are marked *

EASTASIAFORUM

Comment

Name *

Email *

Address *

☐ Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

☐ Notify me of new posts by email.

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

- *Padmanabha Ranganath Chari*
3rd July, 2015, 1:04 pm

A successful military operation has ended in a public relations and foreign policy disaster. Wonder who is in charge of overall policy. Not Sushma-ji for sure. Nor Rathore. Nor Javadekar. Nor Doval. And, now it seems, not Modi either.

So, is Indian foreign policy on auto-pilot?

[Reply](#)

- *Arun Vishwanathan*
4th July, 2015, 2:38 am

Dear Prof Chari,

Actually taking the decision to launch a swift response to the June 4 attack was a good and

proactive move and a welcome change from the previous regime. The military achieved the objective set out before it. Things went downhill thereafter.

Unnecessary public posturing by the political leadership when the Indian Army statement should have been good enough.

One thing is for sure, the top echelons definitely need lessons in strategic communication especially during crises.

[Reply](#)

Donate to EAF

As a freely accessible resource for the region, East Asia Forum relies on donations from those who believe in its importance. [More information.](#)

Donate

Subscribe

enter email here

Subscribe

☒ Weekly digest ☒ Each post

[More info and unsubscribe](#)

Follow us



[Facebook](#)



[RSS](#)

Article Browser



[Twitter](#)



[Google+](#)



Features



[October 14: Japan's high stakes diplomacy with the US and China](#)



[October 7: The global financial safety net is incomplete](#)



[September 2: Can Tokyo survive Trump?](#)



[August 26: Malaysia's road to democratic reform](#)

Suggest an Idea

Do you have any feedback we can use to improve your experience at EAF?

Is there a particular topic you'd like to see us cover, or an author you'd like to hear more from?

Please let us know using the box below.

[Editorials](#)

[About](#)

[Quarterly](#)

[Links](#)