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The Truth About India's Militant Strike in Myanmar

New Delhi's operation is much less novel or controversial than some have claimed.

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June 12, 2015



On Tuesday, the Indian army launched a rare cross-border strike against insurgents just over the border with Myanmar, inflicting significant casualties. Some have been quick to sensationalize the strike into a groundbreaking development in Indo-Myanmar ties and the advent of a new doctrine under Prime Minister Narendra Modi even as the basic details of the incident itself remain murky. In truth, what we know so far suggests that this is in fact much less novel or controversial than some media accounts have claimed.

The most frustrating thing about the operation is how little has been confirmed thus far, down to even the essential facts. At the time of writing, the Myanmar government has **denied** that the operation even occurred on its side of the border despite India's insistence that it did. Other basic details, such as the time of the operation, the casualties incurred, and the degree to which there was coordination with Myanmar, are still unclear due to conflicting reports.

Yet even if these facts remain unconfirmed, what we do know is enough to look beyond the hype and put the strike in perspective. First, while some have quickly billed this as just another 'revenge attack' following a deadly rebel ambush that killed 18 Indian soldiers last week, such shallow tit-for-tat interpretations miss the broader context within which these engagements have occurred. In fact, India's operation is a reaction to an old problem that has recently gotten worse. India's northeast, which borders China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, has long been home to a range of insurgent groups who have been fighting for autonomy or secession for decades. In recent months, New Delhi has grown increasingly concerned about rising violence in the northeast following the failure to secure the renewal of a ceasefire with the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) which is largely based in Myanmar.

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It is within this broader context that the rebel ambush – one of the deadliest attacks in decades – and India's cross-border strike occurred. The Indian government had clearly determined that the militant threat had gotten so severe such that it warranted such a firm response. As the Indian Army admitted in a statement released Tuesday, in addition to the deadly ambush that had occurred before, it had also received "credible and specific intelligence" about further attacks planned in Indian territory which amounted to an "imminent threat."

Second, to seasoned observers, the strike is not as controversial as the sensationalist media reporting suggests. India has carried out several joint-cross border operations in Myanmar previously, most prominently in 1995 and 2006. Moreover, India and Myanmar reached an agreement for cross-border access back in 2010, and the two discuss the issue on a regular basis even if actual cooperation has waxed and waned over the years. While an Indian cross-border strike like this one is a rare occurrence, if government sources are to be believed, cross-border cooperation between New Delhi and Naypyidaw is expected to continue when National Security Adviser Ajit Doval visits Myanmar soon. According to *The Hindustan Times*, India is **expected to** offer intelligence support, satellite imagery and communication intercepts to help boost Myanmar's limited capacity to take on these groups.

Third and finally, it is still far from clear whether this particular incident fits into a larger pattern or a new doctrine under the Modi government. Government officials – in particular, junior minister for information and broadcasting Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore – have been happy to play this up as a "message" to other countries including Pakistan and

China. Other government sources have reportedly claimed that the incident is in line with how the Modi government uses force in similar instances – including responding disproportionately to provocations and being bold about striking preemptively.

In truth, a single cross-border incident affecting one country is insufficient to pronounce a sweeping change in how a country employs force, regardless of how bold it is. And attempts to combine the Myanmar case with other examples – such as India's posture on the Line of Control with Pakistan – risk overlooking the major differences between the Myanmar case and others that are often cited. Even if we overlook the obvious distinctions in the nature of these bilateral relationships as well as how India's relative capabilities match up in each case, the history of cross-border cooperation between India and Myanmar – from joint cross-border operations to bilateral agreements – is rather unique and does not exist with either Beijing or Islamabad.

There is still much that we do not know about India's cross-border strike into Myanmar and what it means. It is also unclear how this will play out in the longer-term, both in terms of India's northeast troubles as well as New Delhi's ties with Naypyidaw. Even more reason, then, to be a little more humble about the conclusions we can draw thus far from a single incident instead of exaggerating developments and declaring new doctrines.