

## DIPLOMACY

# What India's 'Hot Pursuit' Strategy Is and Is Not



Soldiers of the Indian Army during a practice drill. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

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Soldiers of the Indian Army during a practice drill. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

On June 9, India openly confirmed the adoption of a new counter-insurgency (CI) strategy, that of actually crossing international borders to strike at anti-India insurgents, including those from the Northeast, who carry out hit-and-run raids taking advantage of their shelters in adjoining nations like Myanmar.

The pre-dawn 'surgical strike' by the Indian Army on two insurgent bases in western Myanmar's Sagaing division, across the Manipur and Nagaland sectors of the border, became possible after Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally gave the go ahead, and the stage was set thereafter by the Ministry of External Affairs, whose diplomats succeeded in securing the approval of

the Myanmar government at Naypyidaw for Indian troops to cross the international border in 'hot pursuit'.

One can call the latest CI strategy 'new' because during Operation All Clear in Bhutan in 2003, the Indian Army did not go inside the Himalayan kingdom. The assault was carried out by the Royal Bhutan Army and the Royal Bhutan Police. At any rate, no one from the Indian side claimed Indian troops had crossed over. The Indian Army was deployed along the border on the Assam side, trapping the rebels in a pincer attack. Similarly, in 1995, during Operation Golden Bird along the Mizoram-Myanmar border, a group of rebels belonging to the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and other outfits, were targeted by a joint India-Myanmar military operation but the Indian Army did not go inside Myanmar. This is the first time the Indian authorities have confirmed that the Army actually entered a neighbouring country to strike at insurgents.

## **Planning the operation**

Immediately after 18 soldiers of the 6 Dogra Regiment were killed in the June 4 ambush in Manipur by an assortment of insurgents led by the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), the Indian government made up its mind to come up with a fitting response. That is the reason why National Security Adviser Ajit Doval opted out of the Prime Minister's Bangladesh tour, and Army Chief Gen. Dalbir Singh Suhag reached Imphal within 24 hours of the attack. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, too, cancelled a visit to the UK. The strategy planned, the only thing needed was a go ahead from the political top-brass, and Modi was quick to provide the green signal.

The action really began before dawn on June 9. Earlier, satellite images showing the insurgent camps and intelligence inputs were shared with the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar Army). Indian Air Force Mi-17 helicopters (some accounts say the indigenously built Dhruv advance light helicopters were used) ferried elite commandos of the 21 Para Special Forces into Myanmar and they slithered down to carry out a precision attack that apparently lasted about 45 minutes. Infantrymen provided support along the Irrawady river. Two camps belonging to the NSCN-K and the Meitei rebel People's Liberation Army (PLA), that also housed cadres of some other outfits, were targeted. An

estimated 100 or more cadres faced the brunt of the Indian Army assault. Around 50 or more rebels were reportedly killed.

## **Myanmar's sensitivities**

The security establishment in New Delhi knew it needed to be extremely discreet so as not to embarrass Myanmar in any way. That is the reason why the Director General of Military Operations, while issuing a statement, took care to mention that the attack was carried out along the India-Myanmar border. "Early on Tuesday morning, the Indian Army engaged two separate groups of insurgents along the Indo-Myanmar border at two locations, along the Nagaland and Manipur borders. Significant casualties have been inflicted on them. As a consequence, threats to our civilian population and security forces were averted," the Army statement read out by Major General Ranbir Singh, Additional Director General of Military Operations (A), said.

The political establishment, however, decided it would not be bound by such considerations. The junior minister for Information and Broadcasting Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, a former Army officer himself, was more explicit while speaking to TV reporters later on June 9 evening. He not only confirmed that the Indian Army had carried out the strike inside Myanmar, but warned unspecified nations backing anti-India terror groups to beware. Subsequently, of course, other ministers of the Modi cabinet, including Prakash Javadekar, talked of the operation being undertaken with Myanmar assistance. It would be naive to assume that Rathore could have confirmed the news of the Indian Army carrying out operations inside Myanmar without clearance from above. The Modi Government perhaps wanted to send a message to Pakistan, or to the Indian public.

India built a close rapport with Myanmar's military rulers over the past decade when the nation was subject to global sanctions. New Delhi even supplied Naypyidaw with much-needed military hardware, including a few aircraft it resold. This outreach paid off in 2010 when the two nations (at the Home Ministry level on the Indian side) signed an agreement that permitted Indian forces to pursue insurgents across the border. More recently, in May last year, the two countries signed a key agreement on security cooperation that enabled coordinated patrolling and intelligence sharing.

That said, Myanmar, in the wake of Indian ministers going to town about the Indian Army crossing the border, have been forced to deny any operation took place inside its territory. But it also took care to emphasise that Naypyidaw would not allow an attack on a neighbouring country from its soil. In a Facebook post on June 10, Zaw Htay, Director of Myanmar's presidential office, said: "According to the information sent by Tatmadaw battalions on the ground, we have learned that the military operation was performed on the Indian side at [the] India-Myanmar border." He, however, added: "Myanmar will not accept any foreigner who attacks neighbouring countries in the back and creates problems by using our own territory."

The fact that New Delhi's counter-insurgency strategy under Modi is going to be tough has been demonstrated for the first time on the ground. The action also suggests New Delhi's proactive 'neighbourhood first' policy is showing results. The alacrity with which Myanmar let India send in its troops to neutralise a group of Indian insurgents indicates a closer understanding between the two neighbours, even if the Myanmar military's attitude may continue to be driven by case-to-case considerations. The mood in Bangladesh, too, is favourable. Bhutan had cooperated in the past in carrying out a pincer attack to oust an assortment of Northeast Indian insurgents. China may be a different ball game, but as of now, insurgents operating sans borders in the north-east are likely to have sleepless nights. They cannot stay calm in the belief that they are located in a different country.

### **Not a precedent for Pakistan**

Now that India has proved it can act across borders as well, even if with the consent of the country concerned, the question many are asking is, 'what next?' The Army's action – coupled with Rathore's statement — has evoked a predictably jittery response from Islamabad which said on Thursday that 'Pakistan is not Myanmar' and that it was capable of repulsing any Indian intrusion into its territory.

Here, it is important to underline the fact that the action India undertook in the aftermath of the Manipur ambush may not be replicable in the other theatres of terror, like Jammu and Kashmir or other states bordering Pakistan.

Militancy in north-east India and terrorism along the Pakistan frontier are different in the sense that home-grown insurgents are fighting the Indian state

in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura while in Jammu & Kashmir, the violence is being perpetrated by essentially foreign elements from across the border in Pakistan. If the Indian Army went inside Myanmar, it was to deal with insurgents who are Indian nationals (at least the majority of them), but the terrorists in Pakistan who carry out subversive activities in Indian territory are Pakistanis or other foreign mercenaries. The fact that India acted with the consent of Naypyidaw is also not insignificant. Therefore, a single counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism doctrine or strategy would neither work nor be implementable.

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