

## Is It Time to Withdraw the Army from Kashmir?

Vivek Chadha

December 13, 2013

A study of insurgencies reveals that security forces tend to lose the support of intelligentsia and media, as the movement tends to prolong. It is often a result of either low levels of violence or casualties, beginning of an electoral process and the re-establishment of local administration machinery. More importantly, it is the result of missing the wood for the trees. This is especially true for Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

A recent opinion piece by the Editor of a major national daily, argued that it is time for the withdrawal of the army from Kashmir. In his article, he alludes to the army vetoing government proposals on Siachen troops withdrawal and dilution of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). He contends that past conditions represented “a proxy war launched from Pakistan and they have been defeated”. He further adds that if “Hizb or Lashkar thugs again surface some place, you can easily confront them with overwhelming force within minutes.” Finally, in order to illustrate peace on ground, he quotes a figure of 17 security force casualties in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

The spirit of the article rightly highlights the need to build upon the peace dividend, offered by the relative conditions of peace in the state. The need for bold and imaginative political initiatives, as must always be the case for final settlement of popular discontentment, is also seconded without reservation. However, the reading of the situation and solutions offered indicates a rather simplistic understanding of conditions in India’s neighbourhood and within the state.

The assertion that the army can veto a government proposal on issues like Siachen or AFSPA, is either a case of misunderstanding of constitutional powers and privileges, or an under estimation of parliamentary democracy. The last sixty years have proved on more occasion than one that the armed forces remain firmly under the control of civilian leadership in India. It has also been seen that decision making remains a function of elected representatives, albeit with advice from various state organs. Therefore, while the advice of the army on both issues is in public domain to deduce that this advice functions as a veto, is a gross overestimation of the powers and influence of the men in uniform. The government receives inputs from various sources, as a prelude to decision making. Critical inputs are provided by intelligence agencies, as well as state and central administrative representatives. Army happens to be one amongst these agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> See Shekhar Gupta, “National Interest: Disarming Kashmir”, *Indian Express*, December 07, 2013, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/national-interest-disarming-kashmir/1204466/3>, accessed on 09 December 2013.

The article also declares defeat of Pakistan's proxy war in J&K. This would be the likely conclusion, if the basis of assessments are the violence figures between 2008 and 2012 (Table 1).

**Table 1 - Trends of Terrorist Violence in J&K**

Year	Incidents	SFs Killed	Civilians Killed	Terrorists Killed
2005	1990	189	557	917
2006	1667	151	389	591
2007	1092	110	158	472
2008	708	75	91	339
2009	499	79	71	239
2010	488	69	47	232
2011	340	33	31	100
2012	220	15	15	72

Annual Report 2012-13, Ministry of Home Affairs<sup>2</sup>

However, a careful analysis of existing circumstances belies these claims and can often throw up misleading results. A brief look at the increased violence figures along the LoC, not only highlights this paradox, but also provides a sign of times to come in 2014. 2013 witnessed the highest ceasefire violations in eight years. This was also accompanied by a sharp increase in security force casualties until August 18, 2013. By this time, 36 soldiers had already been killed, as compared to 15 during the complete 2012. This was also accompanied by higher numbers of successful infiltration, which is borne by an increase in security force casualties within the state. This is by no stretch of imagination a situation, which can be classified as return of normalcy in the state. The security situation in the state is not only linked with the conditions along the LoC but also geo-political realities in India's neighbourhood.

A closer look at the events in the Af-Pak region suggest that the de-induction of US led forces from Afghanistan in 2014, is likely to become a tipping point for Pakistan to re-establish its control by proxy in that country. This could witness, a deflection of *jehadi* forces from Afghanistan towards their next battle ground in Kashmir. Irrespective of this possible deflection of *jehadi* forces, the end of war in Afghanistan is definitely likely to result in release of Pakistani forces deployed in the region and their re-deployment along traditional areas of the border with India. Both these factors will strengthen Pakistan's ability to heighten tensions along the Line of Control (LoC), as also induct terrorists through vulnerable areas. This should in turn call for careful analysis and monitoring of the developing situation in India's neighbourhood.

<sup>2</sup> Annual Report 2012-2013, *Ministry of Home Affairs*, <http://mha.nic.in/AnnualReports>, accessed on December 09, 2013, p 6.

The call for de-induction of the army from the state is also misleading. The deployment in J&K follows a three tier pattern. The urban areas are provided security by the local police and central police forces. The rural hinterland has the deployment of Rashtriya Rifles (RR), which is a para military force. The army is deployed on the LoC, with the task of maintaining the territorial integrity of the country and stopping infiltration of terrorists. Therefore, any call for de-induction of the “army” is misleading. If it is presumed that the call actually pertains to the RR, then it needs careful analysis if its areas of deployment are peaceful enough for denudation of forces. It also needs to be questioned if the already stretched CRPF, which also looks after Naxal hit areas has the numbers and capacity to undertake this additional responsibility. The army has maintained for long that deployment in counterinsurgency areas adversely impacts its ability to concentrate on its primary role of guarding the nation’s borders. It is in the interest of the country and the army that the CRPF takes over these responsibilities. However, the question that begs an answer is, whether the CRPF is ready for this task?

The final assertion of the article deals with the ability to redeploy in case of an adverse situation in a matter of “minutes”. It needs to be understood that the mere deployment of a force is not a guarantee for its immediate effectiveness. Unlike flag marches in aid to civil authorities, deployment in terrorist infected areas requires the buildup of operational and intelligence network by units, which takes months if not years of diligent effort. Secondly, the initial deployment of security forces in an area is often referred to as the “kinetic” phase of operations, which is usually accompanied by heavier casualties and collateral damage, given the large presence of terrorists. Therefore, re-deployment is likely to be accompanied by not only greater security force casualties, but more importantly civilian ones as well. Therefore, any decision to de-induct forces must be deliberate, reasoned and well considered.

Over a period of time, some sections within the media and intelligentsia have misunderstood the army’s presence in disturbed areas as a reflection of its vested interests. It is time that the reality of its role and responsibility are better understood and articulated. The induction of the army in an internal security scenario is accompanied by the task of bringing violence down to levels, wherein, the elected representatives of the state and the administrative machinery can function effectively. At this stage, political negotiations attempt to find a respectable and long term solution to the problem at hand. Therefore, the timing of these negotiations and the call to undertake bold measures must be a decision guided by the elected representatives of the country. The army was and shall remain one of the cogs in the wheel that assists in the running of state machinery.

The reduction of the army’s numbers, visibility and presence must come. However, the prevailing realities in India’s neighbourhood, its impact on J&K, as well as the recent spurt in violence suggest that the time is not opportune for this decision. It would be appropriate to better understand the impact of US led de-induction from Afghanistan in 2014, along with the conditions both on the LoC and inside the state, before a decision on the issue is taken.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.*