

Bhutan's "Operation All Clear": Implications for insurgency and security cooperation

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Backdrop

Druk Yul, the peaceful Dragon Kingdom of Bhutan, was drawn into the vortex of terrorism in the early 1990's when terrorists from across its border to its south sought shelter in its southern plains. This followed Operations Bajrang and Rhino launched by the Indian Army from end 1990. By 2003 there were about 30 camps inside Bhutan, with the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) owning 13, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) controlling 12 and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) having 5. Scattered across the dense jungles of southern Bhutan, adjacent to Assam and West Bengal, these camps were estimated to lodge about 3500 militants. The Indian Army put a lower estimate of about 1500. The geographical contiguity of the jungles allowed the terrorists easy access to and from India, where their depredations continued. The continued presence of these groups had the potential to destabilize Bhutan and pose major threats to India's northeast.

The Indian Army remained concerned with their presence in these sanctuaries. As early as 1996, it sought active intervention from the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB). While His Majesty accepted the seriousness of the situation, he was clear on actions to be taken. Reiterating that friendship with India was the cornerstone of Bhutan's foreign as well as domestic policy, he made it clear that any direct intervention by the Indian Army in Bhutan would be considered an act of aggression. He said that his Government would prefer to address this issue peacefully through dialogue and persuasion. He also needed more time to personally assess the

situation in his country, determine public opinion and develop consensus over a policy after due process of parliamentary deliberation. If it called for military intervention, the RGB would require time to prepare and train the necessary forces, as well as need additional equipment.

Subsequently RGB initiated a dialogue with the terrorists. This was in accordance with the directions of its National Assembly to ask the intruders to leave peacefully. Five rounds of talks were held with the ULFA and three with the NDFB since 1998. The rebels did not take the talks seriously, postponed meetings and were often represented by low-level functionaries. The KLO did not even respond to the invitation for talks. At the third round in June 2001, the ULFA agreed to close down four of their camps by year end, but instead merely relocated them. Having played an "unwilling host" for 12 years, the Royal Government's patience reached its end by mid 2003. Following exhaustive debates in the National Assembly, on 14 July military action was approved. Operation All Clear was launched on 15 December 2003.

Operation All Clear

Absence of information on the progress of operations characterized the first phase of the military offensive. This led to speculations about the nature of the operation and of Indian support. This was cleared soon after. The military operations were entirely an "all Bhutan affair" without any "manpower or artillery support" from the Indian Army, as some had earlier claimed. The Indian support was limited to "logistic and medical cover" to the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and at no time involved an intrusion in to Bhutan. This was clarified by the Indian External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha on 16 December. The Indian Army did lay a

dragnet within Indian territory to nab the fleeing militants and used helicopters with night vision devices.

It soon became clear that Operation All Clear was a resounding success. By day one, the RBA had inflicted heavy casualties on the militants including the life of an ULFA commander, Rahul Datta. Attacks were launched on all camps in turn. By 5 January, 2004, the RBA declared that the last of the 30 camps was burnt down. The Kuensel reported that more than 500 AK 47/56 assault rifles, an anti aircraft gun, 328 other assorted weapons including rocket launchers and mortars as well as 100,000 rounds of ammunition were confiscated.

The military success could be gauged from the fact that about 650 militants were "neutralized" (either killed or apprehended or made to surrender), as informed by the Chief of Indian Army, Gen N C Viz on 2 January. Out of these at least 160 had been killed. Among the persons arrested were the ULFA ideologue and political advisor, Bhimkanta Buragohain, the

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publicity secretary, Mithinga Daimari, and the NDFB commander in chief, Milton Burman and its action squad commander, Tom Adhikary.

Strategic Compulsions

A feeling apparently developed in certain, mainly non-official, quarters in New Delhi that the

King was deliberately procrastinating military action. A suspicion even arose that the RGB saw in it a bargaining chip to discourage India's support to pro-democracy movement in the Kingdom and to maintain its neutral stand on the issue of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. In the event these were demonstrated to be utterly false. It is the King himself who is the principal agent in ushering in democracy in his country, at times against

expressed resolutions in the National Assembly. Indian stand on refugees has consistently been that it is a matter entirely for Nepal and Bhutan to resolve.

Sound strategic considerations determined Bhutan's policies and this is to be admired. There were a number of strands in determining this policy. First, was Bhutan's determination to seek every opportunity for a peaceful resolution. Second, the RBA with a strength of only 6000 soldiers and no operational experience, either of war or counter insurgency needed time for preparation. Third, the fear of retaliation from the militants and the effects of a possible blowback played a part. There was a fear that military action "would bring about unimaginable suffering to the people" and it would affect the lives of 66,464 people at stake in 304 villages. Fourth was a concern over disruption of its national communication lines between eastern and western Bhutan, which passes through terrorist infested areas in India just south of the border. Finally, economic considerations such as loss of property and impediments to development weighed in to support a policy of tolerance. It is significant that Bhutan heavily relies on India for food supplies, trade and exports.

Domestic political developments were other critical elements in this decision. A Bhutan Gorkha Liberation Front (BGLF) had suddenly come in to existence among the refugees in Nepal and in southern Bhutan, which were supported by these terrorist outfits. The other was the birth of the Bhutan Communist Party (M-L-M) in April 2003, with the abolition of the Monarchy as its principal objective.

Finally, Bhutan could have hardly tolerated a projection of its image as a terrorist harboring nation. Hence, a statement released by its foreign ministry on 15 December said, "Of particular concern were misperceptions surrounding their presence and the implications on the excellent bilateral relations with India which is of the highest importance to the Royal Government and the Bhutanese people." The worst possibility of unilateral action against these camps by India could also not have been missed by its policy elite.

Security Fallout in the Region

• Season of Surrenders

The operation has struck a mortal blow to the insurgents in Northeast India. Two days into the offensive witnessed 89 rebels belonging to the ULFA, NDFB, NSCN and ATTF surrender in Assam. Of these 63 belonged to the ULFA and 23 to the NDFB. The process continued in tens and twenties and crossed 500 by 5 January. Appeals were made to the King for cessation of strikes immediately after the start of the operations. The ULFA maintained that they were "taking temporary refuge" in Bhutan and it was not "tantamount to defying the sovereignty of Bhutan or any international law." The militants did not put up a resistance as was expected and rather saw the lower cadres airing disenchantment with the movement.

• Echoes

Insurgency in India thrives on a network of solidarity. North east India witnessed bands called by various insurgent outfits in solidarity with the ULFA, NDFB, and KLO. Press releases by these organizations all called for a cessation of military operations in Bhutan. The NSCN (K), the MPLF (a joint front of the RPF, the UNLF and the PREPAK) condemned the operations and appealed to the people of the region to display solidarity with these three organizations. However, the response was muted reflecting the changed reality and lack of popular support to these movements.

• Chain pressure

A natural fallout of Operation All Clear is the pressure that other countries in the vicinity will necessarily feel to crack down on terrorist camps in their territories. By 29 December there were reports that the Bangladesh government had started a crackdown. Bangladesh refuted the reports of action against Northeast militants at the pursuance of New Delhi and maintained that the operation was part of an ongoing drive against armed terrorists.

Futures: Security Cooperation in South Asia?

Terrorism knows no boundaries. Today's benefactors could be tomorrow's victims precisely because the course of terror is an unpredictable landscape and its logic "suffers" from no sense of

discrimination. Herein lies the foremost reason for enhanced security cooperation among nations. Areas of conflict in bilateral relations should not be allowed to turn into causes for promoting terrorism in other territories. South Asia has been a hot bed of terrorist activities although it remained largely unnoticed for a long time. The region does not need another September 11 to garner international support. It has the capability to fight terrorism specific to the region on its own, given political will. This is where the Bhutan operations assume special significance.

The most important outcome of the operation may be said to lie in the pressure that it has applied on Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar. All

these countries are known to be playing host to a number of anti India terrorists. Myanmar has expressed its willingness to take action against militant camps in its country. It may be recalled that in 1995, Operation Blue Bird was carried out jointly along the Mizoram-Myanmar border. Similar joint operations are possible, the Indian Army Chief announced on 3 January.

On the contrary, Bangladesh continues to vehemently deny the presence of Indian terrorists in its territory. In the latest round of BSF- BDR meeting on 5 January 2004, India submitted a fresh list of 180 camps in Bangladesh along with the names of 85 prominent insurgents. The BDR in turn submitted a list of "anti Bangladesh" militant camps in Northeast India. Regrettably, the scene does not quite augur well for security cooperation between the two countries.

Operation All Clear just preceded the SAARC summit in Islamabad. The main concurrent theme at the Summit was that South Asia must fight terrorism together. The Summit was historic for having signed the Additional Protocol on the

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Suppression of Terrorism. The Protocol seeks to deal particularly with the financing of the terrorist network by making it a criminal offence to willingly or with knowledge make financial contributions for any terrorist cause. Its positive impact was quickly felt when Pakistan passed an amendment to the Anti Terrorism Act of 1997. The new provisions seek to double jail terms for any individual or entity involved in the financing of terrorism and it has made the offence a non-bailable one.

The positive signs of larger security cooperation are available and it is now the duty of the governments not to allow it to fizzle out. Elsewhere, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was inaugurated on 15 January. On the same day was unveiled a regional anti terrorist structure in Tashkent and Uzbekistan. Terrorism is a global concern and South Asia must fight its terrorism within.



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