

Media as a Force Multiplier for National Security

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General PK Singh, General Bipin Rawat, Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be back at this podium at USI once again and it is always a pleasure to address the distinguished audience here. My interest in the interface between media and national security was actually a product of my membership of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) between 1999 and 2001 when I was the Editor of Financial Express and, therefore, very closely connected to the media. As a member of NSAB I had the opportunity, during the Kargil War, to interact with National Security Adviser (NSA), who at that time was the late Shri Brijesh Mishra, as well as several senior leaders of the Armed Forces. It is that experience that really got me interested in the role of the media as an instrument of national security. What I would say today may be a bit dated as I have been out of the media for six to seven years, and the media in India has changed considerably since then. In my time there was no social media which is now so very important. I must also apologise to some of you who may have been at the National Defence College (NDC) earlier last year when I spoke for the first time on this subject and a lot of what I say today may be a repetition of what I had said then because in many ways the issues are the same. My talk will cover four issues – one is the political and business context in which the media operates; second, the changing nature of media itself; third, the relationship between media and national interest or national security and lastly, the role of strategic communication and media strategy, not just for the Armed Forces but for the Government as a whole.

The most important change in the nature of the Indian media in the post-Independence period has been that the business and

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the political context in which the media today operates is fundamentally different from the context in which it was operating between 1947 and 1977 – the first thirty years after Independence. It was a period of general political consensus, what sociologists call the elite consensus, on a variety of national security issues. Just to give you an example, as a school going kid at the time of 1965 War, the government had decided that everybody would stand up when the national anthem would be played at the end of a movie. That was the first time that the playing of national anthem in movie theatres had begun. Nobody objected and everybody stood up; there was no Supreme Court or the judiciary asking you to do so. It was a natural thing that everybody stood up for the national anthem. This was because there was a certain 'elite consensus' that this was the way you expressed solidarity with the Nation and the Armed Forces at that time. Today, we see that when a similar decision is announced, there is criticism in the media and within the political class; and what it reflects is what I call as the breakdown of 'elite consensus'.

The media today has become far more competitive and far more diverse in its ownership, and readership. It reflects the enormous diversity both, in the nature of our political class and the nature of the business class. We saw this diversity emerging in the 1980s, essentially after the emergency. Several things unfolded in the politics of the country; the emergence of regionalism in politics, caste based parties and religion based politics – all of this is the phenomenon of late 1970s and 1980s. Eighties was a decade of tremendous social tension but it was also a decade of flowering of the Indian media – the emergence of large corporate interests in the media, the emergence of corporate investments in media and a fundamental change in the nature of media. This political change and the change in the nature of media happened over a decade and by the beginning of the nineties we were dealing with a completely different scenario - both in terms of the politics of the country and structure and nature of media.

The media, no longer by the end of the early nineties was seen as the Fourth Estate. The traditional way in which the media is viewed in democracies is that it is a part of the democratic system – the executive, the judiciary, the legislature and the media as the Fourth Estate. That role of the media as the Fourth Estate ended in the nineties when the media became increasingly a

business. People invested in the media in order to earn profit – whether in print or television or even radio. In the early nineties, private radio came up. So the transition that happened in the Indian media, economic policies and politics of the country, resulted in the transformation of the media being seen as the Fourth Estate – as an institution of larger civil society under the State – into another business enterprise. ‘You are successful if you get money’ – that was the basis on which media was judged. Second thing that happened, essentially in the nineties and thereafter, was tremendous proliferation of the media. It was partly because of rising literacy levels, because of which the Indian language media became increasingly important.

I remember when I joined the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) in 2004, I went and called on one of my distinguished predecessors, Shri HY Sharada Prasad who was the Media and Information Adviser to Mrs Indira Gandhi for over 15 years, and he told me that he used to deal with only five Editors - Times of India, Hindustan Times, Statesman, The Indian Express and The Hindu and nobody else; and that if he could manage and influence them, the media was taken care of. In 2004, I was already dealing with dozens of not only English media but also scores of Indian language print and television media. The numbers are quite staggering. If you see the total number of registered newspapers by 2016, it is over one lakh ten thousand. In English language alone there are ten thousand registered newspapers. This huge proliferation of media means that the ability of the institutions of the State to be able to influence the message going through the media becomes weaker and weaker. Earlier when it was a highly concentrated ownership and very few components of the media mattered, it was possible for the institutions of the State to deal with the media. So not only do you have a breakdown of complete consensus, and also the emergence of business interests in the media, but you also have an enormous proliferation of the media. All these taken together, create an environment in which it becomes increasingly difficult for any institution to manage the media.

In my judgment, today we have complete anarchy. There is a view in some sections that the media is highly controlled; that the ruling party or the government of the day controls the media. This is utterly wrong. If you look at the country as a whole, the Indian language television and the Indian language print media, it

seems implausible that anybody can control this media. Ours is one of the most free democracies in the world in which the ability to shape the opinion within the media is not in one person's or any one political party's hands. Now, with that kind of proliferation of the media, if you had elite consensus on any basic issues of national security and national interest, foreign policy, social policy, then at least through that consensus we could have preserved some consensus within the media. Nations are created and nationalism sustained when the people who think alike, go to the similar kinds of education institutions, grow up in similar social environment and with similar kinds of social attitudes etc. But, when you have the kind of anarchy and diversity that we have in our country; the kind of complete business orientation that we have, I cannot imagine that any one institution or individual would be in a position to control the media. So, actually we have a situation today where the ability for organised messaging through the media is virtually non-existent and this opinion of mine would be contrary to the view of a lot of people who imagine that we have a highly controlled media.

One of the challenges of the institutions of the State and media management is that is no clear definition of the 'Right to Freedom of Expression'. Article 19 (1) (a) guarantees the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression. It is this Article under which the media operates and exercises its intellectual freedom. But Article 19 (2) states that nothing in Sub Clause 1 (A) shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law in so far as such law imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right conferred by the said Sub-Clause in the interest of (a) the sovereignty and integrity of India, (b) the security of the State, (c) friendly relations with foreign States, (d) public order, decency and morality, and (e) or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement one affects. Now how does one define any of these? How does one decide what is against the sovereignty and integrity of the State of India? What act of an individual, newspaper or television channel would violate this? And who decides? Generally we all know but, specifically how do you define this? What act short of actually undertaking subversive activity, terrorist activity or inciting the Armed Forces would define an act against the State? Regarding friendly relations with foreign States, which are these friendly States? There are 140 odd

countries, if Indian media criticises China, as it happened during Doklam standoff, do we arrest media persons because they are harming Indo-China relations? Obviously not, because the media is serving the Indian national interests. But the Chinese say that it's our media that is spoiling the India-China bilateral relations. So who decides what are friendly relations with a foreign State? Can Indian media criticise Donald Trump? Does criticising Donald Trump amount to harming friendly relations with a foreign State? Public order, decency or morality – who decides what is morality? If a person wears inappropriate clothes in a conservative part of the country is he/she liable to be arrested under this clause? Or a portrayal of these kinds of photographs banned from publication?

So the point I am trying to make is that we have not very clearly defined what is freedom of expression; what is the legitimate way of expressing freedom of expression and what is illegitimate; what is against the national interest and what is acceptable. It is because of this lack of clarity in the basic constitutional framework that a lot of litigation happen and some people get away with a lot of things because it is up to the judge to interpret each of these clauses. A number of times when media transgresses what many of us would regard as the bounds of national interest, there is no legal basis to control the media. So adding to what I have said in terms of lack of elite consensus, proliferation of media, role of business interest in media, we also have a lack of clarity in the legal framework. So, all these factors complicate the way in which someone, who is responsible for dealing with the media in the interest of the nation and national security, has to operate.

One of the questions that I was often asked when I was in the PMO was – Do we have a media strategy in the government? I discovered soon enough that we don't. There is nobody in the government who has been charged with the responsibility of evolving a communication strategy for the Indian Government and for the Indian State. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is alone handling various issues about publications and licenses etc. and about the day to day public communication of what the government is doing. But, there is no institution that has the responsibility for strategic communication. I remember my friend, Commodore Uday Bhaskar, once writing a note when I was in the PMO suggesting that we should have a STRATCOM Division

within the government and that the strategic communication should be developed as a professional field of activity. I think when Shri Shivshankar Menon was the NSA, he pushed this idea, but I don't think the idea that, somebody should be charged with the mission of developing a strategy for the government and implement it, went very far.

Let me cite you three examples of the importance of a strategic communication. First is an example from the Kargil War. When the Kargil conflict began, I was the Editor of the Financial Express and also a member of the NSAB. The NSA that time, Shri Brijesh Mishra, took the decision to request the NSAB, which was being chaired at that time by Shri K Subramaniam, to create a small group that would advise the NSA on a daily basis. The task was to monitor on a daily basis what was happening and deliberate on different ideas which were then put up to the NSA. My job was to monitor the media and give ideas on media management. One idea that I had suggested and was implemented was that instead of the Army spokesperson briefing the media, the External Affairs spokesperson who was also in the Defence Ministry, late Shri Raminder Singh Jassal should be asked to do this, for the reason that MEA personnel were well trained in dealing with the media. Some of you would recall Raminder's daily briefings to the media. It was an extremely important intervention in the public discourse because public opinion was being shaped by the media. It was the first time that media had ended up in the zone of conflict. It became very important for the government to control the media messaging and this was a good example of a successful media management, except for criticism of Ms Barkha Dutt's coverage at that time, by and large it was a successful management of way the MEA, MoD and Army Headquarters worked together and prepared a daily media brief. It was a successful case of strategic communication during the War.

The complete opposite was the attack in Mumbai on 26 Nov 2008. It was not war but a near war-like situation, with the city under siege by trained personnel from the enemy territory. Various security agencies were involved in dealing with that situation. But, there was complete chaos as far as media management was concerned. So, you contrast Kargil to Mumbai; the way in which the government responded in both the cases in terms of strategic

communication, Mumbai 26/11 was a complete failure of media strategy. In fact, there was no strategy. There were multiple actors, both from the Centre and the State, there were multiple messages going out and the enemy benefited from that. But on a positive side, I would say that, in the recent Doklam episode, in my view as a person from outside, what impressed me was the fact that there seemed to be some consistency in the Indian media. For the first time the Chinese were not in a position to say that the Indian media is inciting the government, which was one of the criticisms they had during the Depsang standoff and were pushing the government to take decisions which according to them were not sustainable. During Doklam, the Indian media was very balanced in their coverage, giving space to the Government, the Armed Forces and Diplomacy to work together and in a manner in which at the end of the day our position got stronger in that engagement. I would be very happy to learn from someone who was within the system if there was strategy, coordination and management of the messaging. Doklam is an example of successful strategic communication.

I would like to say just two more things before I conclude. If you ask me, "Is media a force multiplier for the national security?" Unfortunately my message would not be very optimistic. What I am saying is that in the absence of an elite consensus, the context of extreme commercialisation of the media, the huge diversity of the media, inability or the incompetence of the governmental system to deal with it etc. I don't see a strategy for using media as a force multiplier for national security. There are episodic examples of some successful handling of certain situations; but overall I don't see any strategy because I don't see an institution charged with this responsibility, which would be the institution of the government that would actually develop a national strategic communication plan. But going forward, I would say that there is some recognition of this, both in the private sector and in the media. There is a flurry of activity; recently Zee TV launched an international news channel called WION, where I see some focus on projecting the Indian view point, internationally. But at home, I do not see any such consensus within the media on what is in the interest of the nation. Is the constant telecasting of news about terrorism in the national interest? It is this basic question we have to ask ourselves. Every day we talk about terrorism and India-Pakistan relations. Is this

India's biggest national security challenge? I draw your attention to the speeches of several of the Indian Prime Ministers who have said that India's biggest national security challenge is from China. Is there recognition of this in the media? As Secretary General of a Business Chamber today, I can tell you that it is Indian media that is constantly projecting terrorism as the biggest challenge and this is not in the interest of the Indian business. Who would invest in a country where media projects terrorism as the biggest problem? The investors would always prefer countries with a safe domestic environment. It is not in our national interest to suggest that national security is under threat on a daily basis through the media; because it is not. India is capable of handling the security challenges it faces externally, be it from China or Pakistan or anywhere else. Our security challenges at home are law and order, extremism, violence against women etc. When there is conflict, of course then border becomes the focus; but on a daily basis I cannot accept the view that India's biggest security challenge is terrorism.

If our economy doesn't grow at the rate of 8, 9 or 10 per cent over the next 20 years, our influence in Asia will wane. The power today no longer flows from the barrel of the gun. It flows from the bank balance. It is economic power of a country that today is the only currency in the world. The fact is that the total defence budget of the US is more than that of the defence budget of the next nine powers including China and Russia. But today, the US is being challenged in the market with China. We are being challenged in market space. As a person in this field, I can tell you that the biggest challenge for India is industrialisation. For the last 25 years we have been saying that our share of manufacturing should be increased from 16 per cent of GDP to 25 per cent of GDP. It has not moved, it remains at 16 per cent. Therefore, we need to understand the issues related to the national interests in a holistic manner and the nature of the beast that Indian media is and the complex dynamics of both the Indian State and the media.

Thank you.