

Intelligence Gathering in Today's World*

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Introduction

History is replete with examples of nations and organisations largely attributing their security failures to lack of adequate, hard and timely intelligence. Whenever strategic surprise or security related lapses occur, accusations of intelligence failures are the most convenient fall-out, at times rightly, but more often than not, wrongly as a cover-up for other failings. Both Kargil and the recent Mumbai mayhem were essentially systemic shortcomings and it is grossly unfair to brand them exclusively as intelligence failures. Conversely, only rarely is credit given to intelligence for any strategic or tactical successes. For obvious reasons, details of intelligence successes must remain shrouded in secrecy. Practitioners of the craft of intelligence must remain the silent warriors as there is no place for drum-beating in the business of Intelligence.

Intelligence is a vital tool in the overall security management of a nation and contributes substantially towards national policies and decision-making which may be critical to the very existence of the state. Political and economic intelligence have acquired similar strategic significance as intelligence related to security and military related matters. Intelligence undisputably is one of the ingredients of successful statecraft alongwith economic power, diplomacy, military capabilities, state-of-the-art technologies etc. Notwithstanding its significance, has India, since independence, given the importance it deserves or have we made efforts to inject some energy into this critical capability and skill, only when we have been totally and harshly surprised.

Defining Moments in Indian Intelligence

In the last few decades, for the Indian Intelligence, the defining moments which stand out are firstly, the raising of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) in Sep 1968 as an aftermath of the lessons learnt in the 1962 and 65 operations against China and Pakistan respectively. In fact, after the 1962 fiasco, a review of the performance of the Intelligence Bureau led to the creation of the Directorate General of Security (DGS). Subsequently, after the 1965 War and the Mizo Revolt of 1966, the DGS was taken away from the IB and external functions were given to the R&AW which was specially thus created and the DGS placed under its control. The second most significant step in the evolution of Indian Intelligence has been, as a fall-out of the Kargil War in 1999, when the country was indeed surprised with the non-detection of major Pakistani intrusions along the Line of Control and Pak troops occupying the Kargil heights in Ladakh. The Kargil crisis led to a major and much needed review of India's higher defence management and security architecture including intelligence reforms. The Kargil Review Committee(KRC) was headed by the eminent Defence analyst K Subhramanyam, and subsequently the KRC's report was vetted by the high powered Group of Ministers(GOM). The Government also appointed four task forces to go into various recommendations of the KRC. The task force on Intelligence was headed by ex R&AW Chief Mr Gary Saxena which made significant recommendations.

The KRC pointed out, "There is no institutionalised mechanism for coordination or objective-oriented interaction between intelligence agencies and consumers at different levels. Similarly, there is no mechanism for tasking the agencies, monitoring their performance - nor is there any oversight of the overall functioning of the agencies." The KRC also opined, "The resources made available to the Defence Services are not commensurate with the responsibility assigned to them. There are distinct advantages in having two lines of intelligence collection and reporting with a rational division of functions, responsibilities and areas of specialisation..... Indian threat assessment is a single-track process dominated by R&AW..... Indian intelligence structure is flawed since there is little back-up or redundancy to rectify failures and shortcomings in intelligence collection and reporting....." The Task Force on Intelligence recommended the creation of a tri service Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) as the nodal agency for the analysis of all military intelligence and to synergise the functioning of and coordinate the activities of the three Service Intelligence Directorates (SIDs). Strategic intelligence assets of the Services including those for satellite imagery and Signals Intelligence was placed under the DIA. In addition, the GOM also recommended the establishment of a National Technical Facilities Organisation (NTFO) to be the single window for all technical intelligence inputs to the government including in the growing areas of satellite imagery. The GOM's recommendations were accepted by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) and the DIA came into existence in March 2002 with the NTFO coming into existence in late 2003 taking into it some assets of R&AW's Aviation Research Centre. The government also established the National Security Council (NSC) and the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and various coordination groups for the macro-management of intelligence in a more cohesive manner. It established the Intelligence Coordination Group (ICG) for the tasking of various intelligence-gathering agencies at the apex level. The ICG is chaired by the NSA and has the Cabinet Secretary, the secretaries of Home, Defence, MEA and the heads of intelligence organisations as members.

Some Challenges for Indian intelligence

India's strategic space extends from the Straits of Malacca in the East to the Gulf of Aden in the West. In addition, India's land borders exceed 15000 km which it shares with seven countries including a small segment with Afghanistan (at present this falls in the Northern Areas of POK). India has a coastline that is 7683 km long and an Exclusive Economic Zone of over 2 million sq km in size. With "a ring of fire" surrounding India and all its neighbours in varying degrees of turbulence and uneasy relationships with India, coupled with the 'sieges within' make the myriad tasks for Indian Intelligence mind-boggling! Intelligence on China remains a grey area not only to us but to the world of intelligence as well, including the USA. Buoyed by its growing economic clout, China has embarked on a massive modernisation programme of its armed forces, and more importantly in cyber warfare and

space weaponry capabilities. Its massive infrastructural development in Tibet has to be carefully monitored. In the long term, Indian Intelligence will have to contend with the ever growing multi-faceted Chinese economic, military and cyber threats. Pakistan, as a failing state and at war with itself, presents for the short and mid term, many intelligence headaches for India, including in its export of terrorism to India besides its violent opposition of Indian interests in our neighbouring states, especially in Afghanistan. Of the most critical intelligence significance to our agencies remains the status and safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, especially as a consequence of the rapid Talibanisation inside Pakistan. Though the list of challenges for Indian Intelligence is virtually endless but the NSC and NSA have to prioritise this ever growing list of security threats and derive thrust areas for Indian intelligence. Some of these naturally will include hard actionable inputs on cross border terrorism, infiltration and exfiltration of armed militants, details of various non-state actors fomenting terrorism from Pakistan and Bangladesh, nexus between narcotics and arms smugglers, illegal migration, left wing extremism (LWE), separatist movements within India aided and abetted by external powers and the activities of indigenous communal elements within India, besides illegal money transactions and activities of suspect NGOs. Our North East must get far more attention than hitherto and we should not let it degenerate into an Indian version of NWFP!

Recommendations to Energise Indian Intelligence

To successfully confront the myriad security challenges which face the nation; the government and intelligence agencies need to periodically carry-out in-depth reviews and modify, if required, their policies, organisational structures and procedures and continually endeavour to upgrade their HUMINT and TECHINT capabilities besides monitoring those of the adversaries and potential adversaries. The KRC, GOM and the Task Forces had addressed the entire spectrum of Indian Intelligence in a very substantial manner. It is indeed gratifying to note that most of the recommendations of the Task Force on Intelligence have been implemented, notably the creation of the DIA and the NTFO (now rechristened as NTRO). To these organisations was also added, albeit under the IB, the Multi Agency Centre (MAC) in 2001, to act as a nodal point for Internal Security intelligence gathering and analysis, which reportedly has not been able to fill the void in intelligence concerning counter-terrorism with agencies pulling in different directions. The upgradation of TECHINT capabilities across the spectrum has been underway for some time now and encouraging. To these structures, post Kargil, after the recent Mumbai terrorist strike, has been added the much debated National Investigative Agency (NIA) by an Act of Parliament. The NIA, contrary to earlier expectations, as the nation's first statutory super agency to deal with terrorism cases, will deal with investigation and prosecution aspects only and not have any intelligence or operational responsibilities. Thus reliance on existing mechanisms will continue. It is, therefore, an inadequate response to fight terrorism though it may be able to prosecute those who get caught indulging in acts of terror - for it's a reactive mechanism and not a preventive one. It may be pertinent to mention here that in mid 2008, the Administrative Commission Reforms Committee had suggested that the tasks of investigation and intelligence should be incorporated in a single entity.

National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS)

There is a school of thought that the NSCS has far too much on its plate because it also serves as the secretariat for a host of structures like the NSC, NSA, NSAB, SPG, NIB, ICG et al. It has evolved to be the apex collator of all intelligence, an intelligence assessor, evaluator, coordinator, think tank, promoter of national security consciousness and an interlocutor with foreign counterparts apart from being a neutral and impartial monitoring agency of other intelligence outfits! In the words of the former Army Chief General S Roy Chowdhury, in the current set-up, "Coordination of intelligence at national level still seems to be the Achilles heel of the system and converting the old Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) into the secretariat of the NSC was a thoughtless act of organisational vandalism which set back the intelligence process." The NSA may consider having his own mini secretariat so that the intelligence analyses and policy formulations are kept independent of each other.

HUMINT Capabilities

Notwithstanding revolutionary accretions in various forms of TECHINT there is no substitute for the craft of HUMINT. This is one area in which all our intelligence agencies require substantial and qualitative improvements. Our enemies have most effectively used their human resources in covert actions and proxy war against us since years. We need to train for and acquire this vital capability to use, if required. In a democracy like ours, necessary checks and balances can obviously be built into the system. In addition, all intelligence agencies which have a strategic, operational or tactical role in intelligence need to develop, nurture and effectively employ human resources for intelligence, counter-intelligence, counter-terrorism and other preventive measures. Innovative and painstaking efforts are essential to penetrate the many layers of insurgent and terrorist outfits. Intelligence agencies are not only for intelligence collection and analyses but must have the capability for covert actions to keep the nation's enemies in check.

TECHINT Capabilities

This is an area which has stood us well over the past many years both in peace and war. However, our adversaries are more than aware of our capabilities and have been taking suitable countermeasures to thwart our advantages in this field. Terrorists are becoming hi-tech and techno-savvy by the day. Thus it will remain an ongoing challenge for the NTRO, the satellite imaging and signals intelligence units of the DIA, besides the various technical units of the R&AW and IB to remain abreast of all technological developments in this vital field, especially in the areas of satellite imagery, monitoring equipment, cyber warfare, communication security and digital communications etc. Bureaucratic sluggishness must not put back our technological preparedness. The challenges of Information Age must be squarely faced.

Multi-Dimensional Interactions and Open Sources Intelligence (OSINT)

In today's seamless and highly interactive world, much of the information which the intelligence practitioner seeks is available in the media, Internet, libraries, government records, travelling journalists and the academia. By conservative estimates OSINT caters for nearly 80 per cent of the information sought. Intelligence personnel with useful contacts must continue to be utilised even after retirement and not discarded. Selective outsourcing and keeping experts in diverse fields on call can prove to be cost-effective.

Reorientation

Intelligence organisations being, by and large, establishments following set norms tend to get predictable and lacking in innovation and fresh ideas and do not normally keep pace with emerging threats. Thus these organisations must reorient themselves, to take on today's non-state actors and not confine themselves to state actors only. The USA with all its resources continues to be on the backfoot while dealing with al-Qaeda and Taliban.

Linguistic Skills

An area in which most of our agencies are very weak is in the inadequacy of having well trained personnel in required numbers in various languages, especially of this region. The DIA had made a modest start, as the National Defence Academy was requested to shed popular European languages in favour of languages spoken in South Asia. We need to look at this shortcoming seriously otherwise no amount of sophisticated monitoring and interception systems will suffice. Expertise in certain local languages with personnel posted in border areas to monitor terrorist activities is essential as terrorists generally converse in local dialects.

Avoidance of Turf Battles

Since all intelligence agencies work for a common cause, namely national security, it is their religious duty to willingly share information with sister agencies and avoid turf battles which in the end are always self-defeating and damaging for the nation.

Retaining an Apolitical Orientation

It is but natural that intelligence bosses exhibit loyalty to the government of the day. However, it must be ensured that while keeping within constitutional norms and fidelity to the political leadership of the day, the ultimate loyalty of all intelligence agencies remains totally to the nation and no political pressures get them to sway from their professionalism and the supreme duty to the nation. Not only should the agencies be impartial, but they must take pride in being truly apolitical.

Governmental Oversight on Intelligence Agencies

In India, there is no governmental or parliamentary or political oversight in the functioning of intelligence agencies, as existing in the USA, the UK, France and other democracies. Intelligence establishments must not remain closed societies and the infusion of transparency and some accountability will surely improve their performance. It is time we deliberated over this aspect keeping the Indian milieu in mind.

Police Reforms and Strengthening the Grassroots

The Indian Police must get back to professionalism and standards of the erstwhile CID and sharpen its reach by penetrative intelligence measures. Vital cogs in the entire information gathering machinery of the police at the grassroots level need to be substantially energised. Major police reforms are called for across the board to make them come upto the desired standards and a systemic overhaul is essential. Police organisations in each of the states have to be suitably modernised, technologically upgraded and strengthened by themselves with better motivation, equipment, training and then networked to a national intelligence mosaic for speedy and effective response. Intelligence for pre-empting the ever growing Naxalite/Maoist problems will only be possible with the IB and the affected States Police organisations being substantially revamped. The IB in the areas of J&K, North East, Punjab and above all, the Naxal/Maoist affected states require far greater personnel in the field than deployed now. Rural policing must be given added importance, and information must also be developed with a 'bottom to top approach' rather than a 'top to bottom' approach in all cases of information development. Care should also be taken to recruit personnel from those very areas where hard actionable intelligence is required. local sources, proficiency in local languages and dialects should be vastly improved upon, apart from training and carefully handling this eminently useful and irreplaceable human reservoir.

Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW)

Since its creation in 1968, the R&AW has come a long way. However, we need to give it a far greater covert capability and importantly the independence and initiative that any external intelligence gathering organisation requires. As they endeavour to sharpen both their HUMINT and TECHINT capabilities, their staffing, recruitment and manpower problems persist and some are not too happy with the UPSC route or their own R&AW cadre either. It must be remembered that this organisation is not supposed to be a police organisation (though some excellent police officers have served this organisation) and thus it must attract the best at an early age from all the government services and by direct recruitment from a variety of disciplines be it scientists, economists, the academic world, linguists, bankers etc.

The Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA)

The DIA, raised in March 2002, got off to a flying start producing within one week of its raising, intelligence assessments despite meagre resources at its disposal as the three Services understandably took a lot of time to shed resources for the DIA. The charter of the DIA was issued by the Government with remarkable clarity, after much deliberations with the three Services. The DG DIA is the principal Military Intelligence adviser to the Raksha Mantri, the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (in the absence of the CDS) and the Defence Secretary. He is tasked to coordinate the functioning of the three Service Intelligence Directorates, produce integrated intelligence assessments for the Defence Ministry and national security planners and also to control the strategic technical assets of the Services. He also controls the functioning of our Military Attaches posted abroad and looks after the foreign Defence attaches posted in Delhi. Though the DIA is doing its task well, it must be provided adequate and suitable manpower by the three Services so that it has a credible HUMINT capability also. The KRC had also opined that more than one agency must be tasked for HUMINT abroad to achieve the requisite redundancy. The DIA will only seek military information abroad and thus our civilian intelligence brethren must not feel that their responsibility is being diluted in any manner. In addition, there are a large number of military or quasi military governments in the emerging world who will liaise better with their uniformed community from the DIA. In addition, the DG MI's nomenclature should now be changed to DG Army Intelligence as the overall inter-services coordination now rests with the DIA. In addition, to ensure a better intelligence product and camaraderie between different intelligence agencies there must be far greater mutual representation in each other's entities.

A National Intelligence Authority

On the lines of the US office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) who controls the entire US intelligence including the CIA, FBI, DIA, NSA and a dozen other intelligence agencies, there has been some talk that India too needs a central intelligence authority for collation, analysis, synthesis and dissemination for all intelligence assessments and a central coordinating body for all national intelligence. This apex body should also be responsible for long term assessments on all aspects of national security including the nuclear, space and strategic weapons programmes of potential adversaries. It should also be the repository of the entire data base on terrorist organisations and served by state-of-the-art automation for accurate and speedy assessments for top policy and decision makers of the country. It is felt that this supreme organisation will be able to synergise the entire intelligence endeavours of the nation in a more coordinated and effective manner to confront the security challenges of the future. In early 2009, the Standing Committee on Defence has advocated the need for a "Federal Central Agency" which will have under its ambit all intelligence including that of the Armed Forces. It came down heavily on all intelligence agencies including that of the Armed Forces for lack of coordination and reluctance in information sharing. This aspect needs an in-depth analysis by the new government and the security community keeping in mind the Indian security environment specifically and our existing capabilities.

Conclusion

By any standards, the security environment engulfing India and the region remains volatile which calls for security and intelligence organs of the state to remain on 'high alert'. The recent events in Pakistan, which is in full danger of imploding, adds another alarming dimension to our security problems and consequently a major challenge for our intelligence community. After the Kargil War and now, there have been some accretions to our intelligence set-ups. Like the battle against terrorism we have to gear up on our own as no other country is ever going to give us any credible intelligence inputs. It will also be prudent to let our relatively new organisations mature in their mandated roles besides giving them the wherewithal to fulfill their missions as required. On vital national security issues, major political parties need to come together and be united against terror and not demean the nation by a propensity in scoring brownie points against each other. Intelligence is the first line of defence to ensure security. It is a veritable force multiplier and as such, it is sine-qua-non for all the intelligence organs of India to shed their old baggage of carving out intelligence empires; and by synergetic endeavour accord to the country, they are sworn to protect, the collective community skills instead, which will make India ever ready to confront all challenges it faces in its march forward.

Reference

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*The article is an abridged version of the talk delivered at USI on 13 May 2009.

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