



OPINION

After Anantnag, doing the right things in J&K

New set of metrics that goes beyond security parameters is necessary to evaluate impact of Delhi's policy in the UT

On September 13, Colonel Manpreet Singh, Major Ashish Dhonchak, and Deputy Superintendent of Police Humayun Bhat were tragically killed in action in an encounter with terrorists in the Gadul forests of Kokernag in Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) Anantnag district. Each soldier's life is precious, but losing a commanding officer is especially vexing. Colonel Singh was a highly motivated officer who had earned a gallantry award while commanding the 19 Rashtriya Rifles. Such leaders, who spearhead the Army's operations against terrorists, are always hard to replace.

The incident evoked two sets of widely varying responses. Critics of the government argued that the encounter had exposed the fallacy of the government's assertions of normalcy and of terrorism being close to elimination. On the other side, there were counter-claims that the incident was one of the last gasps of a dying terrorist movement. Much should not be read into a single operation; it should not become a defining moment for the security situation in the Union Territory.

The non-stop media coverage of the incident has also contributed to its impact on public sentiment. Robert D Kaplan has pointed out in his book "The Revenge of Geography", "the

media amplify presentness, the rage and ecstasy and virtue—whatever the case may be—of the present moment, for good and for bad. In other words, politics in the mass media age will be more intense than anything we have experienced, because the past and future will have been obliterated."

What is the reality? Both sides can, to some extent, justify their claims. There has been a steady improvement in the security situation from 2018 onwards. Data from the South Asian Terrorism Portal shows that total fatalities in terrorism-related incidents have dropped from 452 in 2018 to 253 in 2022, arrests have increased from 213 to 331, and arms recoveries from 76 to 209.

Union minister of state for home Nityanand Rai told the Lok Sabha that net infiltration into J&K has reduced from 141 in 2019 to 14 in 2022. Stone pelting and violent, large-scale protests have almost disappeared from the streets. A record 1.88 crore tourists visited J&K in 2022.

Despite the improving security situation, there are still some areas of concern. Pakistan continues its attempt to push in heavily armed and well-trained terrorists into J&K. In the past year, the focus has been to revive militancy in the Jammu region. 2023 has seen an uptick in violence in the Jammu region, including attacks on Katra pilgrims, the execution of Hindus in Dangri village, and attacks on security forces. Five infiltration attempts have been foiled in Poonch and Rajouri in the last three months.

It is now nearly five years since the

state assembly was dissolved, and there is no clarity on when elections will be held. Among sections of the population, there is a sense of alienation, inequality and fear of their identity being swamped. There is no certainty that the Indian State is winning the war of the narratives.

This brings us to the important issue of whether we are succeeding in J&K. While evaluating success may appear to be a simple problem, in reality, most militaries around the world have struggled with it. Bob Woodward's book "Obama's Wars" describes a briefing by General Stanley McChrystal to President Barack Obama on Afghanistan, in which the president said, "Keep thinking about how we'll know we're succeeding and when we'll know." It is now apparent that the United States military did

not correctly assess this critical issue.

Measuring success depends on the set of metrics that is adopted to assess the overall effectiveness of the effort being undertaken to bring about normalcy. Looking primarily at security parameters like violent incidents, body count and infiltration levels, may not provide a holistic picture. In 2012, the total number of fatalities in terrorism-related incidents was 102, 40% of 2022 levels, and remained below the 2022 figures till 2015. However, the absence of violence during this period could in no way be equated with normalcy.

The same mistake must be avoided now. An expanded set of metrics should include, apart from security indicators, aspects like the effectiveness of the government narrative, the success of initiatives like Operation



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Sadbhavana (the Indian Army's civic action programme), attitudes of the local population, local support for intelligence gathering, local support to militancy, levels of radicalisation, Pakistan's efforts to incite violence, economic and development indicators and political activity.

There are several advantages to adopting a holistic set of metrics. These will provide us with a better picture of whether we are moving towards normalcy, which is an acceptance among the people to be fully integrated within the Indian State and the eschewing of violence. It will provide a tangible way to evaluate the effectiveness of our strategy, enable efficient resource allocation to crucial areas, and help adjust our tactics based on measurable outcomes.

There will be greater transparency in measuring success, bringing in greater accountability and improving inter-agency coordination. Shared metrics provide a common language that can help synchronise efforts.

Finally, metrics can offer insights that feed into long-term strategies, allowing for a more proactive and less reactive stance. Over time, metrics can reveal trends that may not be immedi-

ately apparent, offering critical insights into the evolving nature of the conflict and thereby helping to shape countermeasures.

A note of caution needs to be injected here. The problem in J&K is deeply rooted in intricate social, economic, and political issues that defy simple quantification. Therefore, qualitative insights are critical for a more complete understanding of the situation. In this, leaders who are directly engaged in the operations must provide professional, unbiased insights to the political leadership.

The attention on the Anantnag encounter shows that there is still too much emphasis on counterterrorist operations. While this is not unimportant, with only 81 active terrorists in J&K, the time has come to pivot our focus toward other factors that can contribute to lasting normalcy. A holistic set of metrics offers a balanced roadmap to not just "doing things right" but also "doing the right things".

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