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To Fight the Inimical Hybrid War, India Must Rapidly Enhance Staff Strength of Specialized Central Law Enforcement Agencies like NIA, NCB, ED and focus more on Coastline Patrolling

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Is there an urgent need to drastically augment the quantitative and qualitative capabilities of India's specialized law enforcement agencies such as NIA, ED and NCB? The answer is a loud and affirmative 'Yes'. With limited manpower at their disposal, the above-mentioned agencies, in spite of their potential are hamstrung while combating the inimical elements of hybrid war unleashed upon India.

Key Points

- Since 2014, Prime Minister Modi led NDA Government has embarked on a massive modernisation drive of Indian Armed Forces and Central Police Forces, and has massively augmented India's war fighting capability through a series of critical weapon systems induction.
- On similar lines, capacity building through enhanced staff strength is now the need of the day for India's central law enforcement agencies for effectively combating the hybrid war unleashed on India by its adversaries.
- India must drastically enhance the staff strength of National Investigation Agency (NIA), Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and Enforcement Directorate (ED)
- Each of these organizations must have a minimum staff strength of 5000-7000 personnel. Dependence on deputation must be replaced with enhancing of own cadre strength.
- Given the enormity of challenge that India is facing from cross border smuggling of narcotics, fake currencies and illegal weapons, as well as hawala funded terrorism, this is the bare minimum staff strength enhancement that is needed in these agencies.
- Capacity building of dedicated cadres of NIA, ED and NCB can be done through special recruitment drives by Staff Selection Commission (SSC) primarily for personnel at the rank of Sub Inspectors, Assistant Enforcement Officers and Constables.
- An NIA branch for every state is a must. Bigger states must have more than one NIA unit.
- A dedicated specialized unit under CRPF should be set up, on the lines of COBRA for providing armed support to central agencies like NIA, ED, NCB, DRI or even CBI during raids which are sensitive in nature. It should have a minimum strength of 3000 personnel.
- Ad hoc deployment of central or state police should be replaced with a permanent unit as mentioned above.
- India should also consider reactivating the plan for setting up of Central Marine Police Force for coastline patrolling or assist coastal states with creation of specialized India Reserve Battalions for coastal patrolling.
- Responsibility of maritime patrolling till 5 nautical miles, presently with marine or coastal police units of respective states, should ideally be handed over to Indian Coast Guard since the performance of coastal policing units of respective coastal states have been far from satisfactory

The increasing role of central agencies in combating cross border arms smuggling and narcoterrorism

In September 2021, in a major success for Govt of India, Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) declared the seizure of almost 3 tons of narcotics from Mundra Port in Gujarat, which is estimated to be worth around Rs 20,000 crore. Later, in October 2021, the case was transferred to NIA to investigate and unravel the syndicates that order such huge consignments, most of which originate from Afghanistan. Over the last few years, Department of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), NCB, BSF and Indian Coast Guard have been working relentlessly to track, identify and seize major consignments of narcotics being smuggled into India.

In the same league, Enforcement Directorate or ED, has been tirelessly working to identify and neutralize hawala syndicates that are being used for funding terror operations in India. In June, 2020 for example, ED attached properties of Kashmir based Aijaz Hussain Khwaja for alleged money laundering activities for 'various separatists and militant activities. In March 2019 likewise, it had imposed a Rs 15 lakh fine on three terror operatives namely Mohd Ayub Mir, Bechh Raj Bengani and Harbans Singh and seized cash worth lakhs.

NIA has also been conducting raids at various institutions and organizations linked to Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) of Jammu in Kashmir, for terror funding cases. In January 2019, NIA has similarly conducted

raids at various locations across India to investigate cases related to terror funding by Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF) alleged to be a front organization of Pakistan based terror outfit LeT. Post amendment of the NIA Act, the National Investigation Agency was also given the mandate to investigate incidents associated with fake currency smuggling. Interestingly, NIA is also investigating multiple cases related to smuggling of arms by terror groups and has been actively involved in investigating activities of Maoist groups as well. Additionally, NIA has also recently taken over investigation of a major conversion racket in Uttar Pradesh unearthed by UP ATS. ED likewise, is also investigating the money laundering aspect of this giant conversion racket that was found to be actively converting Hindus into Muslims allegedly through unlawful means.

Defining 'hydra-headed hybrid war': Deep connect between narcotics, cross border smuggling activities, money laundering and terrorism

The above-mentioned incidents may apparently seem as ubiquitous and unexceptional incidents of illegal activities on the borderline of organized crimes that happen in every country. But in the present era, against the backdrop of a multitude of subversive activities that India is facing, and the enormity of such cases, be it flooding India with narcotics, smuggling of fake currencies and sophisticated arms, illegal infiltration, incidents of radicalization, illegal

conversion rackets acting with impunity and with access to unlimited foreign fundings, as well as seemingly innocuous NGOs instigating civil violence and anarchy type activities within the country, these then cannot be termed as ordinary crimes but can surely be defined as vicious arms of the hydra-headed hybrid war unleashed upon India.

It has to be remembered that when Pakistan's deep state espouses the military doctrine of 'Bleed India with a Thousand Cuts', it need not be merely through fidayeen terror attacks but through a multitude of means including wreaking havoc on the nation through drug addiction and circulation of fake currencies, through flooding India with illegal but sophisticated arms, pumping in money for subversive activities including illegal conversions, radicalization of young minds and facilitating illegal infiltrations for demographic change. Each of these in unison and in conjunction with each other, has devastating effects on Indian economy and social fabric. Also, it is these narcotics trade running into thousands of crores that not only devastates the youth of this country but generates funds that are channeled back to Pakistan to fund subversive activities including terrorism against India.

With time, as it has become more difficult for deep state of Pakistan to inflict damage on India through conventional, non-

conventional and sub-conventional wars, its propensity to corrode India through narcotics, by triggering civil unrest through disinformation warfare, by sneaking in arms and fake currencies and through funding of radicalization, would increase.

'Hybrid War' further explained: External dimension of internal security

Unlike major acts of terror which have often led to consolidation of popular national mood to show solidarity with the central government that encourages a more hardline approach of India towards Pakistan, in case of incidents of civil unrest triggered or amplified by external funding and disinformation campaign, experiences across the world has shown that the respective Central or Federal Governments, when they take stringent action, often find that response or perception of people on such issues are mixed and are not always in solidarity with the regime. This is more so because of disinformation campaigns that often confuse people and make them point fingers at their own Government instead of looking deep into the bigger ploys often controlled by invisible yet powerful syndicates operating from elsewhere but controlling minds through manipulation of social media narratives. Therefore, neutralizing such 'orchestrated' violence and nipping them in the bud are critical to managing internal harmony that might right now be the prime target of India's adversaries who have been attempting to promote discord within the country

through various means.

In countering hybrid war, role of investigation and enforcement agencies as important as that of uniformed armed forces

While the Government of India has done the right thing in activating central agencies to probe such cases, there is also a pertinent need to augment their capacity. It has to be remembered that unlike in case of conventional conflicts or countering insurgency, in the realm of hybrid war, more often than not, the law enforcement agencies would have an equal or perhaps a more profound role than uniformed forces such as army, navy, air force or even central armed police forces. Therefore, the capacity building of central law enforcement agencies is perhaps as important as it is to augment the capacity of armed forces and central armed police forces.

Need for capacity building in NIA with a branch in every state

Take for example the case of National Investigation Agency (NIA). Since its formation in 2009 through an act of Parliament, NIA as India's premiere federal terror investigation agency has been at the forefront of unearthing terror plots, investigating acts of terror and dismantling terror modules as well as hawala networks that fund such operations. In 2019, Government of India further enhanced the powers of NIA. Today it also investigates cases related to cross border smuggling of fake currencies, narcotics and illegal arms.

However, even as the burden of responsibilities are increasing on NIA,

its capacity building continues to be incremental instead of the exponential expansion that it urgently needs. While NIA has 12 branch offices apart from its headquarters in Delhi, there is an urgent need to upgrade many of its camp offices into full-fledged branch offices. Today given the enormity of threat of terror that India is facing, ideally there should be an NIA branch in every state of India, with larger states having more than one major office including several sub-zonal level offices. Ideally, NIA should have a similar branch network as CBI or Enforcement Directorate has.

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Also, apart from branch expansion, there is a pertinent need to expand the manpower of NIA. As per data made available by Ministry of Home Affairs earlier this year, NIA has a sanctioned strength of 1277 personnel with a staggering 427 posts remaining vacant, at least up till earlier this year. This has to be addressed on a priority basis. A sanctioned strength of 1277 personnel is not good enough to secure a country of 135 crore people and against a multitude of deep states in neighborhood with nefarious designs. NIA needs to have a sanctioned strength of nothing less than 5000-7000 officers to the least.

Given the terror threat India faces, NIA needs to have a sanctioned strength of nothing less than 5000-7000 officers

Further, NIA must reduce its dependence on officers on deputation because it creates a perpetual void of institutional memory when officers on deputation return to their parent organization. The core team of NIA has to be its own cadre of dedicated officers while some can come on deputation to add value in the organization. Capacity building of dedicated cadres can be done through special recruitment drives by Staff Selection Commission primarily for the personnel at the rank of Sub Inspectors and Constables.

The Case for Capacity Building in Enforcement Directorate

In today's era, the job of Enforcement Directorate (ED) has become much more profound and critical. Its role is no more limited to unearthing benami properties of unscrupulous elements or enhancing revenues for government, but has gone beyond that.

It has become evident in the last two decades that organized crime and terror syndicates can simply not function without the support of well-oiled money laundering machineries and skilled hawala operators. Therefore, the work of Enforcement Directorate today is as important as that of NIA and NCB in the realm of countering narcoterrorism. The fight against terrorism is not just about neutralizing

terror elements before or after a terror attack has happened but also about dismantling the infrastructure through which funds and weapons are supplied to such modules. In this era of cryptocurrencies, the complexities and challenges of unearthing and dismantling those money laundering syndicates have become even more pertinent.

While the Enforcement Directorate, which works under the aegis of Ministry of Finance, has a reasonably well spread-out network of offices and branches, the staff strength of Enforcement Directorate, as per media reports, is merely around 2000. One needs to deliberate as to whether a staff strength of a mere 2000 personnel, majority of whom come on deputation to ED from other departments, is good enough for a country of 135 crore people, and which has been facing major challenges of laundered money fueling terrorism, narco-trade and other subversive activities. Therefore, ED too needs a considerable augmentation of its manpower so that it can deal with a multitude of major cases at the same time and conclude investigations in stipulated time instead of dragging it for years.

How much is an adequate manpower may be a matter of debate but certainly ED should ideally have a manpower which is almost at par with the sanctioned strength of CBI now, which is

around 7000. Given India's threat from illegal financial syndicates funding terror, narcotics and subversive activities, India can ill afford to have incremental growth in manpower of specialized law enforcement agencies like ED. There has to be a quantum leap.

On the lines of NIA, capacity building of dedicated cadres of Enforcement Directorate can be done through special recruitment drives by Staff Selection Commission primarily for the personnel at the rank of Assistant Enforcement Officers.

NCB needs similar manpower augmentation

Much on the lines of ED and NIA, NCB has been suffering from a paucity of adequate manpower. As per reports, it has been functioning with a staff strength of a mere 1100 personnel. However, it has a reasonably well spread-out network of offices which also might require augmentation in times to come given the rising menace of cross border narco-trade and its connection with terror and other subversive activities.

On the positive side, as per recent reports, Home Ministry has sought for 3,000 additional posts for NCB in order to expand its footprint across India. It is this kind of augmentation that is similarly required in NIA and ED as well.

Create an Armed Special Response Team for assisting NIA, NCB, ED and Customs in their special operations

The work of NIA, NCB, Customs and even that of ED is often hazardous. The personnel of these organizations often have to confront armed terrorists and ruthless criminals. NIA often has been seen going in for investigative operations with CRPF or other CAPF platoons giving them armed security cover. At times, other similar agencies even have to take aid of state police forces. This ad hoc process needs to be replaced with an institutionalized approach through the creation of a dedicated wing under CRPF, India's largest central police force, for raid, assault, intervention and cordon operations.

The Special Unit that can be raised under CRPF, can be termed as RAID (Rapid Assault Intervention & Deterrence) Division, much on the lines of specialized wings of CRPF including COBRA, RAF, SDG and PDG. A dedicated RAID Division of CRPF should ideally have 3-5 battalions consisting of a minimum of 3000-5000 personnel spread across cities and areas in the vicinities of NIA, NCB, ED and DRI (Department of Revenue Intelligence Offices) for seamless support to their operations. Small platoon sized units can be directly deputed to offices of NCB, NIA, or DRI offices while larger units can be deployed on operational requirement basis.

Why raise another unit instead of NSG? Reason is this....

The reason why a dedicated quick reaction team, titled ideally as RAID (Rapid Assault Intervention & Deterrence) should be created and deployed instead of using National Security Guard (NSG) is because NSG is specially trained for high intensity counterterror and anti-hijacking operations. The operations conducted by NIA, NCB or DRI concerning drug syndicates, fake currency and arms rackets or terror modules, even though are hazardous in nature, may often fall short of being termed as pure-bred counter terror operations involving high intensity gunfights. Therefore, deploying NSG for operations of NIA, NCB or DRI may be underutilization of the force.

However, on the contrary, the reason why ad hoc deployment of central police units, based on whichever is available in the vicinity, or depending on state police units to assist in the such operations may not exactly be the right approach, is the following.

Operations of NIA, NCB, DRI and those of ED at times may require Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for specific kind of cordoning off of areas, detention of suspects, keeping public or mob at bay, preservation of evidence as well as engaging in gunfights if needed. Raising a dedicated unit under CRPF for assistance of central law enforcement agencies would thus be a better idea since it would also help in developing 'institutional memory' on how to deal with such unpredictable situations

in future. That may not be the case with ad hoc deployment of nearest available CAPF platoons or taking aid of state police units considering also the importance of confidentiality of such operations that should only be conducted by closely knit units that have developed a certain level of camaraderie and confidence in joint operations.

India must also consider raising the staff strength of Customs

In addition to the suggestions given above, ideally Government of India should also consider enhancing the sanctioned strength in Customs Department to make sure that every port of India, including all the minor ports apart from major ports are properly monitored and surveilled. It has become amply clear that syndicates or routes used earlier for smuggling of contraband goods is now being used for smuggling in of narcotics materials as well as weapons systems, and because of which scrutiny of every port, major or minor, round the clock is needed.

Patrolling of territorial waters should be entirely handed over to Indian Coast Guard

Over the last one decade or so, there has been a commendable augmentation in the fleet size of Indian Coast Guard and their performance has been impressive on several counts. However, unlike the case of Indian Coast Guard, in spite of the massive support given by the Central Government for enhancing coastal policing infrastructure for coastal states, the performance of coastal

policing units has been far from satisfactory. In many cases, the speed boats and interceptor craft whose acquisition was funded by Ministry of Home Affairs, are lying inoperative and coastal states have not been able to use coastal policing assets to optimum levels. Ordinary constables deputed for such jobs have often been found lacking skills sets required for maritime policing.

Therefore Ideally, much on the lines of land border security, which is handled exclusively by central border guarding forces such as BSF, SSB or ITBP, the entire patrolling of territorial waters should be handed over to Indian Coast Guard instead of the present structure where up till 5 nautical miles, responsibility of patrolling and security is with coastal policing units.

While the coastal police stations can remain as they are and Indian Coast Guard would be handing over the detainees and suspects to respective police stations, since law and order is a state subject, it is amply clear by now that maritime patrolling is best when entirely handed over to Indian Coast Guard.

Can the idea of Central Marine Police Force be reactivated?

The plan for Central Marine Police Force was mooted by Government of India a few years back for guarding the coastal regions of the country consisting of a vast coast line running

into several thousand kilometers. That idea, if possible, should be activated into action now.

The other option for Government of India may be to assist the coastal states to raise specialized India Reserve Battalions for patrolling of coastal areas. With India's western land borders with Pakistan becoming more impregnable for Pakistan, the possibility of India's coastal borders being used more intensively by deep state of Pakistan to orchestrate nefarious activities in India becomes more profound and there are enough precedence in the past of the same, including both the 1993 bomb blast and the 26/11 terror attack, wherein in both cases the sea routes were used for shipping in men and material for executing acts of terror. Therefore, a more comprehensive security of coastlines is a necessity now.

In the last fifteen years or so, there has been massive augmentation in the battalions of the Central Armed Police Forces such as CRPF, BSF, SSB, ITBP and CISF. Similar efforts are also continuing to modernize India's Armed Forces. Such augmentation and modernizations were necessary for various reasons. Now it is time for augmenting the strength of India's central law enforcement agencies such as NIA, NCB, ED as well as focusing more on coastline patrolling. It would considerably help India to combat the hybrid war unleashed on her.

Modi Government has the resolve

Prime Minister Modi led NDA Government, over the last seven years have taken a series of bold decisions to make India more resilient and formidable militarily, and has considerably enhanced India's resolve to decisively combat and defeat cross border terrorism and Maoist terrorism. Modi Government 2.0 with Amit Shah as Home Minister, also made critical reforms in NIA Act that enhanced the powers of NIA. This apart, the Government accomplished the hitherto considered impossible task of abrogating Article

370 and decimated terror syndicates there. It is therefore now expected that the much-needed augmentation of staff strength of the central law enforcement agencies would happen at a rapid pace given the focus of Modi Government on providing India with a comprehensive three-sixty-degree security architecture of which internal security management is a critical part.

(The author is a public policy analyst and a well-known commentator. Views expressed are his own)



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