

# A great nation must stand with its soldiers

Understand the challenges faced by them in safeguarding national interests in disturbed areas

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The writ petition filed by more than 350 serving army personnel in the Supreme Court is certainly in the best interests of our national security. Perhaps this was the only option left after the curative petition, moved by the Union of India seeking recall of the July 2016 verdict, was rejected by the apex court in April 2017. The Attorney General in the curative plea had highlighted the negative impact of the verdict on the ongoing counter proxy war and counter-insurgency campaigns in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the north-eastern states along with its long term ramifications on national security.

It is apparent that the verdict was given without a clear understanding of the contours of an asymmetric war-fighting arena, which was also highlighted in the curative petition. The term 'asymmetric warfare' encompasses proxy war, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, terrorism and all kinds of irregular warfare. The instant petition provides one more opportunity for the army and the nation to apprise the court of the challenges faced by the soldiers in safeguarding

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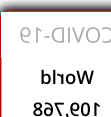
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national interests in disturbed areas. Hopefully, this time around, a favourable verdict will restore status quo ante.

Areas experiencing unrest are declared 'disturbed' only when the situation becomes grave and the movement turns violent with the armed cadre using lethal force to undermine the Constitution and challenge the authority of the government. Let's not forget that the majority of the terrorist and insurgent outfits in J&K and the Northeast have pursued secessionist designs, which have been contested and blunted only by the security forces with their sweat and blood. Such environments are dreadfully chaotic and are characterised by volatility, unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity. This is owing to the lack of intelligence, fluidity of operations, blurring of the distinction between friend and foe, malicious media reporting, changes in tactics and technology employed by the terrorists, time-sensitivity in accomplishing missions and the inimical stance of the subverted sections of the population and, at times, even the administration.

No proxy war or insurgency can survive without local support. It is the population that facilitates terrorists to wage war against the state by catering to their daily needs and providing hideouts, guides, intelligence on the security forces, porters for the movement of warlike material and planting improvised explosive devices.

While the terrorists and their supporters expect the security forces to abide by the international conventions, laws and rules of engagement, they themselves believe in none. Their modus operandi hinges on guile, deception, treachery, irrationality and barbarity with which they manipulate and shape the environment to bleed the security forces and put them on the back foot. Moreover, to dampen their morale, one of the most profitable low-cost, high impact options they always exercise is to discredit the soldiers by implicating them in human rights cases. Such vilification campaigns receive illimitable funds from inimical external players, including the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It's a flourishing business for anti-national elements in such environments. There are numerous instances in which terrorists have used the locals as human shields while fighting the security forces and even killed them in cold blood and blamed it on the soldiers.

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The Indian Army's record in upholding the law of the land and respecting human rights has been commendable vis-à-vis the other armies engaged in such warfare. Unlike the United States, NATO and Pakistan armies, the Indian Army has scrupulously refrained from employing fighter aircraft, gunships and artillery to neutralise terrorists. It has continued to operate with minimum force despite the disadvantages. According to statistics available with the Indian Army, approximately 96% of the human right allegations against the army have turned out to be false. Those found guilty of criminal misconduct or wilful defiance of the rules, have been dealt with sternly as per the law, with prior sanction of the government, as was the practice prior to the verdict, in terms of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.

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The soldiers fight this dirty war not because they enjoy doing so; they do so because for them welfare and safety of the nation is always paramount. At this juncture, our great nation should stand with its army on this vital issue, which portends imminent threat to our national security. Any tampering with the time-tested 'asymmetric warfighting architecture' will be a retrograde step in our campaigns and, over time, is bound to impinge on our sovereignty, unity and integrity besides robbing our soldiers of their boldness and initiative.

The issue certainly merits some serious soul-searching and introspection at all levels.

**General Bikram Singh is the former Chief of the Army Staff**

***The views expressed are personal***

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