



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

Interview

Jingoism will not be able to surmount the deep discontent, says Manish Tewari



SMITA GUPTA



Former Union Minister Manish Tewari. File photo: K. Murali Kumar

The Balakot bombings that followed the terror strike in Pulwama have given an edge to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP)'s election plank of muscular nationalism and has, for the moment, at least, taken the spotlight off the failures of the Narendra Modi government. In this interview, former Information and Broadcasting Minister Manish Tewari — who is also a Distinguished Senior Fellow at The Atlantic Council's South Asia Centre — talks to Smita Gupta, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, New Delhi, about the impact of the BJP's nationalism card in the upcoming general elections, the role of the media in amplifying the BJP's message, why the Congress has been circumspect on the subject and whether it is appropriate to use national security as an election issue. He also points out that while the Balakot bombings appeased public opinion to some extent, it has also created a new strategic dynamic on the sub-continent that will make it tougher for future governments to deal with incidents of terror. Excerpts:

Till the Pulwama attack, the opposition's narrative of unemployment being at a 45-year high, rural distress, the negative impact of demonetisation, etc appeared to be gaining ground in the public discourse. But after the Balakot air strikes, that narrative appears to have changed. Pakistan, war, terrorism appear to be the preferred subjects. Does this not give the advantage back to the BJP?

There are two parallel discourses: there is a discourse in the ether which is about Pakistan, Kashmir and war hanging low over the subcontinent. But juxtaposed against that is a narrative on the ground, a narrative of deep agrarian distress, economic deprivation, a feeling on a daily basis. So this constant invocation of nationalism, or this stand-off with Pakistan, may appear to give an advantage to the BJP because it drowns out the voices talking about the failings of the government over the past five years, but my innate sense is that people vote their pocket. And interestingly, if you look at the history of those nations that have gone to war, war-time Prime Ministers have never been re-elected. Mr Vajpayee was an exception. Look around the world and you will see that war time Prime Ministers don't get re-elected.

Why is that?

Primarily, because conflict breeds deprivation, suffering, because conflict is no picnic. Even if you have a military victory, it comes at a stupendous cost in both men and materials. A good case is that of Winston Churchill: Churchill was actually at

Yalta, if I am not mistaken, negotiating the future of post-war Europe when he got the news that he was no longer Prime Minister. In the Indian context, there is a deep distress on the ground, and even if the jingoism over the airwaves tries to drown it out, yes, that voice will not be heard in the public discourse, but that voice will be heard on voting day.

You made this comparison with Churchill, but Britain at the time lost almost an entire generation in the war. By comparison, we haven't suffered those kind of losses.

That was an analogy in a separate context — not in the context of the current stand-off between India and Pakistan. Currently there is a deep discontent and deep divide — will this jingoism be able to surmount that? My sense is no.

But Mr Modi is a very skilled practitioner in the art of whipping up national hysteria, and he is doing it very consciously...

You may whip up hysteria, you may want to keep the country on the edge, because a country on the edge gives you a discourse which drowns out all the failures of the past five years. But it does not take one thing away and that is — people have been hurt and people are still feeling the hurt. Eventually, this jingoism may become counterproductive because people may expect this government to squarely acknowledge some of the things that have gone wrong. If you are going to try and sidestep it, I don't think it will work.

Let's take your home State, Punjab: there's a general feeling in the Congress that it is one State in which the party will do very well because Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh has, in a sense, out-Modied Modi in his rhetoric.

Punjab is a land that has suffered the cost of conflict for centuries because every invader came down the Khyber Pass through what was then West Punjab to East Punjab on the way to Delhi. They (people of Punjab) have internalised the suffering that conflict brings. While Punjab has always been ready to confront and combat — that's why it still contributes more than its share to the Indian defence forces — it still has a strong anti-war constituency.

These are people who have borne the cost of conflict and, therefore, know what conflict brings. If conflict comes upon them, they are not going to run away. But

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unlike some other parts of the country that have never seen what conflict means, Punjab has a very hard-headed realism when it comes to conflict. There are two narratives: it is a land of fighters, but every fighter also understands the cost of the fight. So while Captain Amarinder Singh, because of his military background has been hawkish on national security, he is not a warmonger. Warmongering does not go down very well in Punjab.

Do you think the Opposition erred by saying that it would support the government in any action that it might take. Should it have confined itself to saying it supports the armed forces?

That's an artificial distinction because the way the civil-military relationship is structured in a democracy, it is the civilian leadership that ultimately takes the final call. The fact is India has been at the receiving end of terror, sponsored by the deep state in Pakistan over a period of time, not just post-Pulwama. [There has been a] latent urge in the country that the strategic patience that we have exercised should move to a more pro-active response. So when you lost 40 people in the Pulwama attack, there was a desire that there should be a strong response and the government went ahead and carried out a "non-military pre-emptive strike" on Balakot.

You can get into a nuclear situation without realising that you have gone so far up the escalatory ladder. By doing that, public opinion may have got appeased to some extent, but now there is a new strategic dynamic on the sub-continent. What happens when the next big terror attack takes place? Every government, henceforth, will be under pressure to make this the benchmark — to take strong military action against Pakistan. You have put a new strategic doctrine in place, and the consequences of a confrontation with Pakistan are not going to be pleasant, both in material and moral terms, for both countries. You are on a escalatory ladder. The problem with escalatory ladders is that they acquire a momentum of their own and ultimately you reach a flashpoint.

In a broader strategic context, the border action post-Uri and the Balakot bombings have sent out two signals. No longer is the LOC (Line of Control) sacrosanct, and no longer is the action going to be confined to Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK). Because if you went to Pakthoonkhwa, which is in the original Pakistan as envisaged in 1947, you have unleashed tectonic forces that will require very careful handling. Over a period of time, Pakistan has become the Somalia of South Asia, lots of ungoverned spaces, so if any *tanzeem* (organisation) decides to go rogue, than it can bring India and Pakistan to a flashpoint and easily escalate. You can get into a nuclear situation without realising that you have gone so far up the escalatory ladder.

The option of taking action on the lines taken this time was considered and then set aside by both Atal Behari Vajpayee and Dr Manmohan Singh after the attack on Parliament in 2001, and after the 26/11 terror strike in Mumbai in 2008, respectively. Many people believe that this time retaliation of the sort we saw was inevitable and that whether it was Mr Modi or some other Prime Minister, similar action would have been taken because..

You are right to an extent. Earlier, I had alluded to strategic patience. People were feeling short-changed because of the strategic patience that we had been exhibiting for such a long time. But there is a difference. If you rewind to after 1971, the first flashpoint came in 1987, when Operation Brasstacks brought you very close to a confrontation.

The second flashpoint came in 1990 when Pakistan threatened India with the use of nuclear weapons which prompted Robert Gates, then Deputy National Security Adviser, to come on what was _____
euphemistically referred to as the **Mr Vajpayee and Dr Manmohan Singh became recipients of intense national outrage for not proceeding against Pakistan.**
Gates Mission. Then you had _____
Kargil, and then the attack on _____
Parliament — you completely mobilised the army. Operation Parakram in 2001 was the largest mobilisation of armed forces after 1971. .. Pakistan also mobilised its forces and you were eyeball to eyeball. During that mobilisation, two incidents took place, Kalchuk and what is referred to in strategic affairs theology as the Twin Peaks Crisis, and you had one more that could easily have escalated the confrontation. Mr Vajpayee, to his credit, exercised strategic patience again, and so did

Dr Manmohan Singh, post 26/11. So both Mr Vajpayee and Dr Manmohan Singh actually absorbed the domestic criticism and became the recipients of intense national outrage for not proceeding against Pakistan.

But did they do that in the national interest of the country? I ask this question because currently the BJP is projecting Prime Minister Narendra Modi as this strongman who had the courage to take on Pakistan frontally?

The fundamental question that you have to answer before you get to what you are asking is: do outrages committed by semi-state actors have to be dealt with by conventional means? Because this means that every time there is a terror strike, the response would have come through our military assets, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, special forces whatever. Or is there another way of doing it? The danger in using the conventional option is that there would be retaliation and..

That could escalate very fast?

Pakistan will retaliate. (In the current case), the Pakistanis came and dropped bombs close to our military installations in broad daylight. There was an aerial dogfight and we lost a plane. There are reports that possibly, Pakistan, also, lost a plane, though unconfirmed. They had our pilot in their custody. What we really need to go back to is India's covert capacities that were dismantled by former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral. I find it unbelievable that one Prime Minister who was in office for not even a year can dismantle your covert capacity. And even if Mr Gujral had rolled up whatever covert capacity we had, future governments and future Prime Ministers could have easily rebuilt it.

Ghost wars have to be fought through ghosts and the Indian state at its highest level has to get over this moral dilemma as to whether states should actually use semi-state actors or outsource the response to terror perpetrated against them. It's difficult for a civilised and responsible state to go down that path, but the other option is even more frighteningly dangerous. Because if you start by using conventional assets and think that there is space for a limited war under a nuclear overhang, you are wrong — there isn't space for a limited war under a nuclear overhang.

So, is the problem with the current government that when you have a covert operation you can't talk about it? And if you can't talk about it, you can't extract any political mileage out of it?

There is a way of extracting political mileage out of it also — a large number of operations which were carried out by Israel against forces which it considered hostile to it, the governments of the day found a way of taking ownership of those actions if not immediately, over a period of time. The question that needs to be asked is: are you going to use conventional or covert capacity in order to change the behaviour of the Pakistani deep state or simply to appease public opinion in India?

If it is to change the behaviour of the deep state, then there is a certain political cost that you might have to incur for keeping quiet. [The] Post-Uri [strike] wasn't the

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first cross-border operation. Border action teams of the Indian Army have been active since almost 1998, but this time, the government decided to take political ownership of that operation. It may have appeased public opinion here but did it deter Pakistan? The answer is no, because you had Pulwama after that. So if the surgical strike was that silver bullet which would change the behaviour of the deep state in Pakistan then, with great respect, that silver bullet did not work. We are not in an ordinary situation. South Asia is the most dangerous flashpoint in the world. We are nuclearised; we have very opaque nuclear doctrines and it is not only India-Pakistan, there is a triad, there is China which also has nuclear weapons. So we must be very careful in how we respond to non-conventional or sub-conventional challenges, terror being the most classical, in the kind of instruments we use against it ..

Do you think after Pulwama, the Congress and the Opposition erred in not questioning the government on the intelligence failure — even the Governor spoke of it — the fact that they didn't have clearing parties, the CRPF jawans troops were not airlifted even though they had asked for it...

First, I don't agree that you need to airlift your paramilitary forces. The paramilitary forces should move on the ground because they are moving in their own country.

There is something called area domination, something to instilling confidence that the Indian state can operate with impunity whenever and wherever it likes. Therefore, this option of airlifting (troops) actually defeats the entire purpose of deployment.

Insofar as clearing parties are concerned, I completely agree — if the route was not sanitised, the basic precautions were not taken, those are things that need to be investigated in great detail. The difficulty is that once an incident takes place, we completely forget about it after a couple of days. Pathankot happened and the government appointed a committee under the former Army Vice Chief Lt Gen. Philip Campose to go into that attack. He has given a series of recommendations — 90 per cent of those recommendations have not been implemented.

Hard questions need to be asked of the government because (I don't buy) this argument that let us not politicise terror. The fact is terror is political. What is terror?

It is the use of violence to achieve a political objective and, therefore, to pretend that terror is not political or that you should not politicise terror

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is a completely nonsensical argument. Why is Pakistan using terrorists? They are using terrorists because they feel they will be able to wean Kashmir away from us: it is a political objective that they want to achieve through the use of violence.

Why has the Congress not been asking these hard questions? Why is it not pushing for the restoration of a government through holding of Assembly elections? Why is it not pointing out that the suicide bomber is an Indian citizen? Pakistan may be fomenting terror, but why is it finding fertile ground here?

You are right. How does a person become a terrorist? First there is alienation, then radicalisation and then terror, that is when radicalisation gets operationalised. We have to intervene at the first two instances — prevent alienation of the population and then prevent radicalisation. We are now attempting to deal with it when the incident takes place through the use of hard power.

Kashmir requires a far more enlightened approach than what this government has been pursuing for the past five years. A large part of the alienation in Jammu and

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Kashmir is because of the PDP-BJP experiment which proved to be an abysmal failure. You require a fresh approach, a fresh outreach to the Kashmiri people, to young people. All these incidents of beating up Kashmiris all across the country does not help the cause at all. You have to very pro-actively prevent radicalisation, and these days, it is becoming far, far more difficult. You don't have to go far to get radicalised — a lot of radicalisation is happening on the internet on all these *jehadi* websites. You have a huge challenge in front of you. You need to ask those hard questions about intelligence failure.

We have demanded an enquiry. In two of my briefings, we have asked these questions and demanded answers even in a tense stand-off you have lost 40 of your CRPF personnel.

You asked for an enquiry. Mr Modi's reply was the attack on Balakot. He doesn't want to set up an enquiry because that would be acknowledging a failure of his government. If you look at his record over the last few years, he never associates himself with anything that smacks of a failure. How does that answer your question?

But is an attack on Balakot an answer to the loss of paramilitary lives? An enquiry is not just to apportion blame, an enquiry is also essential to ensure that next time such an attack does not repeat itself. If the Prime Minister thinks an enquiry is admission of failure, that is an instance of flawed thinking. An enquiry is conducted definitely to bring about accountability.

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But the most important thing about an enquiry is that SoPs are put in place so that they don't happen again. That is precisely what we are saying. You punished Pakistan for terror that now goes back four decades, but at the same time we need to

be cognisant that one strike is not going to change the behaviour of Pakistan. Terror will not end because of one strike in Balakot.

Mr Modi is trying to polarise society along religious lines, Hindus versus Muslims, ahead of the elections to counteract any criticism of his governance failures. The Congress, on its part, if one looks back over the last year or so, is trying to change its image of being a pro-Muslim party. In the run-up to the Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh elections, for instance, Rahul Gandhi visited temples, and described himself as a Shivbhakt.

Is that the reason why the Congress feels today that if it asks too many questions on Pulwama, it gives Modi a handle to say that the Congress is pro-Pakistan, which he has been doing in any case?

By Mr Modi's saying that if you ask questions, you are a Pakistani does not make anyone a Pakistani. But there is a time to ask these questions. After Pulwama, when we were getting into a confrontational position with a nuclear armed neighbour then the decision you have to take is: is this the time to ask questions or is the time a little later? The time has really come to very loudly ask those very hard questions as to how the Pulwama outrage took place. Yes, there was a suicide bomber, but how did he get through, and target a bus-full of CRPF people? That question will be asked.

You earlier referred to Kargil being one of the occasions when war became a tool for an election victory. Why did that happen?

I am not saying that war became a tool for an election victory. Mr Vajpayee's government was a caretaker government. We were, in any case, going in for elections. And then Kargil happened... we were victorious in Kargil, and Mr Vajpayee did get the credit for getting those heights vacated. So it is not that he used it as a political tool. If you really look at it, the BJP under Mr Vajpayee was far more circumspect in using national security as a prop. The current dispensation does not have any compunctions in using national security as a prop. We have always said we are not opposed to hard action against Pakistan. What we are opposed to is the politicisation of national security in order to reap electoral dividends. That is the distinction that we have always drawn.

Has the media played a negative role in creating this atmosphere of jingoism?

It is not happening from today...the broadcast media got liberalised in 1991, their first big war moment came with Kargil when nationalism peaked. Their second big moment came with 26/11 and the third with Pulwama and the airstrikes after that. You had these three peaks of hyper-nationalism going back three decades. But the problem with Pakistan is far, far deeper: over the past 70 years you have created such a fertile field of odium and hate that it is very easy to tap into it and get a negative reaction.

What is the narrative between India and Pakistan? Partition, four wars, cross-border

When you have such crass politicisation, you are dealing with a very strange kind of situation.

terrorism, they claim that we interfere in Balochistan etc. There is not a single strand of positivity in that narrative at all. Therefore, .in the TRP age, it is extremely easy to harvest that field of hate for eyeball purposes, and this is a very cynical game that the media has been playing, especially the broadcast media, over the past three decades. I am not talking about the print media.

So it's not that they are doing it under pressure from the government but its part of the TRP game?

It's both — part is pressure, part is the TRP game. For instance, rewind back to 1999, or 26/11, I don't think the media was under the pressure that they are today, but the approach of the media was similar.

You lost your father to terrorists. The Gandhi family has lost two of its members to terrorists. But the Congress does not bring up that issue much, or even the creation of Bangladesh — that was such a huge military success —to bolster your national security credentials.

I think there has been a sense in the Congress for a very long time that it is inappropriate to turn national security into political football. Otherwise, it is not only the creation of Bangladesh. In 2006, when you had the confrontation with the Chinese in Arunachal Pradesh, the rescue of Mahathir Mohammad, the Maldivian government, in 2006. There is a huge chain of national security successes that the

Congress Party can boast of... but if push comes to shove, it will become part of the narrative.

Recently, Lt Gen Hooda was appointed to head the Congress's Task Force on National Security. What is his mandate and why did the party suddenly think it necessary to create such a position?

You need a fresh approach to national security. You need to periodically look at the entire canvas of national security through a fresh pair of eyes. And we have multi-dimensional challenges: not only is it a two front situation with Pakistan and China, it is also the very rapidly creeping Chinese influence in the oceans around India. You need, therefore, to have a clear vision as to how you will tackle all these issues. Under those circumstances, it is good that General Hooda will look at all these issues and come up with a report.

Is it just a one-man task force?

Well, he has the flexibility of co-opting whosoever he thinks is required. Political parties should review the strategic situation in the neighbourhood — and not only in the neighbourhood — and try and formulate India's responses.

How can the Congress counter the hyper nationalist narrative of the BJP?

There is a national security paradigm and that entails certain responses, and those responses can only be carried out by the government of the day. Given the government of the day, it would be more than eager to harvest it for political purposes. What could be more painful than the fact that the day the Balakot airstrikes were carried out, the Prime Minister addressed a rally with photographs of all those 40 CRPF jawans who were killed as a backdrop on stage — trying to send out a signal 'I have avenged their deaths'. When you have such crass politicisation, you are dealing with a very strange kind of situation. And the only way of countering it is to take it head-on, call a spade a spade, and say that this kind of politicisation is not in India's national interest, which you won't take lying down. The country will appreciate it.

Are we going to see that as part of the Congress campaign?

Yes, yes.

Alliances would make a huge difference to the Congress tally, given that it is starting at rock bottom. But I get the sense that the party is caught between strengthening itself and forging alliances and this is not really helping its cause.

We have an alliance in Tamil Nadu in place, an alliance in Bihar is being tied up.

In Uttar Pradesh?

It was not a very honourable way in which a fait accompli was presented to the Congress..

Sorry to interrupt, but in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, the Congress did not accommodate the SP and BSP saying they were asking for too much. Now, the BSP is saying the same thing to the Congress in Uttar Pradesh..

Not two seats.. In Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Rajasthan, if they had wanted two seats we would have very willingly given it to them. Why did the talks break down there? Because there was an expectation that was on the higher side that the party thought was unreasonable. Now if the counter to that is that you leave two seats, you are kind of trying to stick the knife in and turn it.

In Delhi, it is a very different situation. The Congress was ruling Delhi till 2013 — true, we have gone through a rough patch since then, but there is a feeling in the

In Delhi it will be a fight between the BJP and the Congress for the Lok Sabha.

local leadership which is also very widely shared by the workers that when it comes to the Lok Sabha, the preference even in Delhi, is not going to be AAP — it will be a fight between the BJP and the Congress. So under those circumstances, you have to fight an assembly six months down the line....

I am trying to understand this: if a party says that we need to strengthen ourselves; therefore, we will concede as little space to others that's legitimate, but given the situation in the country, given the fact that the BJP is still the dominant force...

I think what is important and critical is that the terms of the alliance have to be honourable, and, therefore, if there is an honourable alliance that also takes the

past into consideration and not the present political arithmetic alone, you can have an alliance.

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In 1992-93, she was a Reuter Fellow at Oxford University, U.K. During her year at Oxford, she wrote a long paper on The Emergence of the Far Right in West Europe. She has contributed chapters in academic books on the Bharatiya Janata Party, the politics of Uttar Pradesh, and Parliament. She holds an M.A. degree from Delhi University.]