

## Sheela Bhatt, Indian Express Interview

EXPRESS- Do you agree with the view that owning up the so-called surgical strike by the Indian army and then by the government was as big story as conducting military operation to smash the “launching pads” along the border?

MENON: I am not sure what this question means. I think that we need, in such cases, to distinguish between a narrative or story, and the substance or outcomes that such actions are meant to produce. Clearly outcomes are much more important to the national interest than a story.

EXPRESS- What impact the overt operation will have in a short term and in a long run on India-Pakistan relationship?

MENON: This operation is part of a long term process of managing the situation on the line of control and of limiting the action of the jihadi tanzeems and their sponsors in Pakistan. As such it will have some short term effect. But it will not alter the fundamental drivers of the India-Pakistan relationship or the managed hostility that elements in the Pakistani establishment seek with India, largely for their own institutional interests in Pakistan.

EXPRESS- The government finds that the overt operation is a great psychological advantage as, they claim, the soldiers confidence level has increased and even commonmen, all over country, are feeling satisfied to see that India is not anymore “bichara” taking hits from Pakistan army and the Pakistan-based non-state actors every other month at the LoC.

“Kitne saal maar khaynge? Kab tak?” people were asking frequently as they were unaware that during ten years of Congress-led rule Indian army has conducted such operations successfully. Therefore, do you think “owning up” strike is a psychological advantage?

MENON: This is really a question in pop psychology. I do not think that emotions or gratification of this sort should be the sole or main basis of serious policy and actions.

EXPRESS- Do you think India's overt claim has confused Pakistan? How is Pakistan likely to react?

MENON: This is for Pakistan to answer. The government of India's choice of action, and the manner of its initial announcement, seem to have been designed to prevent an escalation of the situation on the line of control with Pakistan while signalling firmness internally in India.

EXPRESS- Why did Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took political call to not make public strikes across the border?

MENON: All previous governments of India have chosen to deal with such issues covertly because they were focused on creating outcomes rather than managing public opinion.

EXPRESS- As NSA, were you in favour of keeping strikes secret or you were following the political call of then government? Why?

MENON: All such calls or decisions are ultimately political, and should be so in a democracy. My personal views are irrelevant. And the previous policy worked. It produced the outcome sought, namely, restoring peace on the line of control and limiting infiltration for a while.

EXPRESS- You have argued that, "By keeping operations covert rather than overt, it was made possible for the Pakistan Army to climb down and for a temporary peace to be re-established." The hardliners in New Delhi may argue back that it is not India's task to help Pakistan "climb down" after they shed Indian blood at the border. Also, the moot question is was the LoC ever pacified, really?

MENON: This government too has done so by saying, in DGMO's initial announcement that it planned no further action, by acting only against the jihadi launchpads and not the Pakistan Army, and by not choosing to enter into public disputation with Pakistan by releasing videos or other evidence.

EXPRESS- Also, don't you think "temporary peace" was at huge cost to India and quite cheap for Pakistan?

MENON: No. Because the limited peace was used for the more important purpose of addressing alienation among the population of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and to restore normalcy within the state after a period of extreme stress and cross-border terrorism in the early nineties.

EXPRESS- The government claims that the fundamental idea behind making operation public is to make Pakistan understand that those infiltrations, frequent skirmishes and the deaths of civilians and soldiers due to the border ceasefire violations should not be cost-free, anymore. Will India succeed in its aim?

MENON: Cross-border terrorism never was cost-free and never should be.

At the same time we should be clear that such operations will not change the minds of our adversaries or stop cross-border terrorism from Pakistan into India. Their purpose can therefore only be tactical, as they are unlikely to have strategic or long-term effects.

EXPRESS- What do you think how will unfolding tactics of New Delhi to handle Pakistan impact India-China relation?

MENON: This remains to be seen. To a great extent that depends upon the decisions that China takes to support India in fighting cross-border terrorism from Pakistan.

EXPRESS- Many Indians are asking, "Why is China defending Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar?" After China's support to Pakistan at the UN on Masood Azhar issue the perception is percolating down in India that it is China who is protecting weak Pakistan and making it stronger enough to take on India in the low-intensity war. Do you think popular narrative on such complicated diplomatic issue will harm Indian interest in long run?

MENON: Only China can answer for herself and her actions. I actually think it is useful if China is left in no doubt of the negative impact that some of her actions have on India's interests and on opinion in India, since ultimately the general thrust of policy will be affected by the direction of public opinion in a democracy like India.

EXPRESS- Do you think expressing support to dissent in Baluchistan by India will help lessen the pressure on the Kashmir issue? Will official mention of Baluchistan help India or harm it?

MENON: Here again, my preference is that we make policy with outcomes in view rather than with an eye on the headlines. Only the government can say what its words on Baluchistan actually mean in practical actions that India will take, now that it has chosen to speak on the issue in public, and what outcomes it expects those words to produce.

EXPRESS- In your new book 'Choices: Inside the making of India's Foreign Policy' you have said that soon after the Mumbai terror attack Pranab Mukherjee and you were in favour of immediate retaliatory strikes inside Pakistan and Pak-occupied Kashmir (Pok). Why that strike wasn't conducted? Who were against it in the government?

MENON: This is not an accurate or complete characterisation of what the book says. Immediately after the Mumbai attack there was naturally a discussion within and outside government of what India's response should be and overt military action was certainly one of the actions that was seriously considered. This is a normal process in any democratic government. Many heads and opinions make better policy.

My book actually argues, by looking at different cases that there is no simple right or wrong, black or white, true or false, good or bad choice in such foreign policy and national security decisions. Besides, these decisions are made in the fog of events, without the clarity or knowledge of all the factors that comes with hindsight. Policy makers, therefore, seek to minimise harm and maximise gain.

EXPRESS- Its argued by the ruling party and the government that Prime Minister Narendra Modi deserves full credit for taking "the political decision" to go for the strike and the Indian army should get full credit for successful military execution of it. Do you agree?

MENON: How the government describes its decision making and who they chose to give credit to is clearly a matter of domestic politics to them. But the political desire to claim credit should not in any way take away from the admirable professionalism with which the Indian Army has conducted itself.

EXPRESS- You have claimed that operations across the Line of Control (LoC) were not publicised in the past because they were not aimed at domestic constituencies. Many leaders in the government will counter-argue that public opinion can't be ignored by popular leaders. Senior BJP leader argued with me that why condemn the NDA government harshly for aiming at the domestic constituencies? In realpolitic in most countries its leaders are sensitive to opinion of their public. History is full of such examples. In his book *The War at Home: The Domestic Costs of Bush's Militarism*, Frances Fox Piven proves that, " how the Iraq war for American politics has been a swelling of nationalism and authority-worship centered on the person of President Bush. It helped to generate an "emotional fervor." The Iraq war was a domestic "power strategy." In some way the appeal of war in domestic constituency is inevitable. Take example of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher or President Putin. Don't you agree?

MENON: I think that public opinion is certainly a factor in all political decisions. At the same time, a decision to use force by a state is also a military decision, with policy and other impacts on relations with other actors and countries and on the national interest. It is important that the quest for publicity should not be the main driver of decisions with

important consequences beyond the public mood. Besides, it is the function of leaders to explain their decisions and to lead public opinion too, not just to follow it blindly. I think that we underestimate the wisdom of the Indian public if we only make lowest common denominator decisions to play to domestic constituencies.

EXPRESS- Coming back to Pakistan, don't you think that "the overall bilateral strategic framework of restraint" needs re-look since Pakistan remains in central position to add fuel to fire in the Kashmir valley?

MENON: As far as I can see what the present government has done remains within the framework of strategic restraint that previous governments of India have followed. What seems to have changed is the domestic rhetoric that some party and other officials are using on and off the record.

You mention the situation in J&K. That is by far the most important issue that should be addressed. I do not see cross-LoC strikes minimising Pakistan's attempt to stir up trouble or spread alienation among the people of J&K.

EXPRESS- Pakistan and few other countries argue strongly that unless issue of Kashmir is settled peace can not be established in South Asia. The current government in new Delhi supports hardline on Kashmir saying, " Kashmir to hamara hai, PoK vapis lena hai" For them the dispute is mainly about Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. In such situation how will peace return on the borders?

MENON: It has been our consistent official position that J&K is an inalienable part of India, and that the issue with Pakistan is the return of Pakistan occupied territory. But that has not prevented us from seeking to lessen the burden that India-Pakistan tensions impose on our people in J&K.

J&K was relatively peaceful a few years ago. This was certainly not due to Pakistani goodwill. Pakistani interference and meddling has been a constant factor which we have to neutralise. That continues. Besides that, I think that we should look seriously and honestly into the reasons why J&K is no longer peaceful and identify the reasons why alienation and violence have grown to such an extent. A sensible policy would first address those causes that are within our control, addressing which would have the most effect.

EXPRESS- The government in it's briefings to media has argued that increase in the ceasefire violations by Pakistan is due to Indian army's intensified response to Pakistan army and the Pakistan-based non-state actors aggression at the border. The chronology, as New Delhi claims, is that India is responding to the Pakistan side's increased violence at the border. What dangers lie ahead in cycle of actions and counter-actions with equal ferocity at the border?

MENON: We have to see how far both governments wish to allow the cycle of violence to continue or escalate. The signs so far suggest that neither has yet indicated a desire to escalate the situation. Winter and other objective factors, like the Indian Army's success in stopping infiltration and intelligence led operations against terrorism, will determine the numbers of violations or infiltrations more than individual ceasefire violations or limited cross-border actions such as these.