Impact Of Israel-Hamas Conflict On Terrorist Radicalization In India

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1. Abstract

Since 2020, the world has suffered through various global shocks including the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, and disturbance in the Middle East due to conflict between Israel and Hamas, leading to shipping and trade crises. In the case of Israel-Hamas, it's a country fighting a non-state militant group that is a recognized terrorist organisation i.e. Hamas. With the world being polarised, this has fetched conflict of interest of regional powers, and geopolitical ambitions into it and has made the power balance of West Asia fragile. The mass killing of Palestinians by the Israel Defence Force (IDF) has generated anger among pro-Islamist terrorist organisations (like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State). There emerges the risk of terrorist radicalization, violence, and killing of innocent people across the world. With India and Israel growing a sturdy bond over the years and the former standing in solidarity with the latter over the Hamas conflict and condemning any form of terrorism, India is at a high risk of growing radical terrorist activity within the country including brainwashing of the youth via misinformation which can pose an immediate threat to national security. The paper analyses the possible impact of the Israel- Hamas conflict on Indian society, India's global stance on the issue, increasing terrorist radicalization, and measures to mitigate and avoid threats to the national security of India.

<u>Keywords</u> - Terrorist Radicalization in India, Propaganda Tactics, Security Challenges, Israel-Hamas War, Vigilant Domestic Policies.

2. Introduction

In 2021, when the world had just started to heal from the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no hint that any other conflict would escalate. Thrashing this belief, Russia invaded Ukraine in Feb 2022, dividing the world again into the Global West vs Global East. Following this, another global shock came on 7th October 2023 when Hamas, a militant group, launched a surprise attack on Israel, killing mostly civilians, and holding a few as hostages. Statements across the world showed support for Israel, standing in solidarity with Israel against terrorism. There was a wave of anti-Islamic sentiments and criticism of Hama's acts of violence, and brutalities across the world. Israel responded by launching an incursion into the Gaza Strip and declared that it would not rest until it had destroyed Hamas. Till February 29th , the launch has more than 30,000, mostly civilians[1]. This has partially shifted the world stance from pro-Israel to being

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[1] As of 29th Feb, 2024, more than 30,000 people were killed in Gaza, according to Hamas run Health Officials in Gaza.
https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-30000-israel-war-hnk-intl/index.html

hesitant to support Israel. Israel's biggest ally, the United States, even faced domestic backlash on the streets of the USA, demanding immediate cease to human rights violations of people of Palestine.

There have been protests around the world and a stern rise in antisemitism. Israel's actions have greatly wounded pro-Islamic states in West Asia. Islamic terrorist and militant groups have held Israel's action as an aim to eradicate Islam from its region, which has unleashed a rise in radical terrorist activities as the war takes a religious cause. India, which has been a victim of terrorist attacks since its inception, has supported Israel initially. Later, India also voted for a ceasefire keeping in view the collateral damage and human rights violations. With a diverse population and safeguarding its national interest, India has tried to balance between interest and values in this ongoing conflict. With an increase in radicalization and growing sympathies for Palestine, it is vulnerable to the terrorist radical activities that may hamper its national security. Can India stay away from any casualties, while maintaining its stand on the conflict is a test of time?

3. Global scenario: Resurgence of terrorism post-Israel-Hamas War

With the onset of the Israel-Hamas War, the world is polarised again, and this time it involves religion as a core element. On one side are growing anti-semitic movements and on the other side are protests against rising Islamophobia. Internationally it is creating a risk of increasing terrorist attacks in several parts. Europe, which is divided between standing against terrorism or opposing Israel's violation of human rights in Gaza, has witnessed rising protests through college campuses, and streets with some being pro-Israel and others pro-Palestine. According to a British security officer, the war in Gaza was likely to become the biggest recruiter for Islamic militant groups since the Iraq war in 2003. Three people died due to a stabbing outside a church in Nice, which was quoted as an Islamic Terrorist Attack by the French nationals. The assaulter was heard chanting 'Allahu Akbar'. Security has been tightened through the states of Britain, Germany, Belgium, and Italy with rising concerns of attacks on Jews and Christians. The danger is more from the attacks of 'lone wolves', the ones who get self-radicalised through the information war online and have no such links to established terrorist organisations. Self-radicalised believe that they must act in any way possible to contribute to the cause of Islamic Jihad. These individuals are not easy to track down and can further give impetus to terrorist organisations to extend their network of activities.

The resurgence in terrorism is vibrantly visible through the attacks launched by Houthi militants, backed by Iran in the Red Sea in support of Hamas and Gaza. With equipped weapons, they have targeted Israeli vessels and also declared the US and UK as their legitimate target. It is remarkable to note that 2 Indian vessels were targeted by the Houthis, an indication that they perceive India as a supporter of Israel. Well, this also calls for further threats to the national security of the country. Adding to these recent developments is the attack by Iran

launching a missile strike on Pakistan. With terror effects looming over Europe, and West Asia, it now seems to have arrived in South Asia. South Asia houses the largest Muslim population in the world. The radical Islamist ideology has a strong foothold in the region with the presence of states like Pakistan and Afghanistan, shelters to prominent terrorist organisations. With the Taliban taking over Afghanistan, the region is more prone to radical polarisation. Numerous pro-Palestine protests were observed in Pakistan and the Taliban has criticised the violence in Gaza. Although the Taliban has refused to send its troops to Gaza to fight, organisations like ISIS and Tehrik-e-Taliban(TTP) can use the war to gather influence, support, and recruitment for the cause of pan-Islamic ideologies in South Asia. The world is not just polarised on opinions but faces a threat to its national security. More than a planned attack from a terrorist organisation, the risk mainly lies with the 'lone wolves', who get self-radicalised and may encounter an act of violence, may not on a large scale but enough to make the atmosphere of a country worrisome. Also, identifying these attacks in prior is difficult. The countries need to tighten their boundaries and put their internal security on high alert.

4. Propaganda Tactics of Hamas - Israel

As much as it is important to win the war on the battlefield, it is equally important to win the war of the hearts of the population across the world. In the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, the one who has control over the narrative may lose the battle but would win the war. This conflict is not new, and has existed since 2014, thus Israel is aware of the propaganda tactics of Hamas and should be able to compete with them. Hamas, on the other hand, knows that Israel is the military superpower in the region and it is impossible to stand against them on the battlefield. The Israeli government has spent millions of dollars on ad campaigning, YouTube, social media, and Twitter (X), to give space to its journalists and politicians and broadcast the attack video of 7th October.[2] At the heart of Israel's information campaign is to remind the world about the 7th October attack which is the main cause justifying its current actions. Israel Defence Forces (IDF) allowed the reporters for the first time to visit a terrorist site so that the world could see the cruelties of the attack. The message is clear: if they allow Hamas to survive, they are vulnerable to more such attacks. Apart from this Israel has also posted videos of its humanitarian aid in Gaza and how sick babies are being shifted to hospitals in Israel. They have also surfaced videos of circulating Arabic pamphlets, phone calls, and warnings to civilians to desert a place before it is struck down. The aim is to portray to the world that the fight is against terrorism and they are trying their best to avoid civilian casualties. While proving the need to attack civilian places Israel posted a video after its raid on Al Shifa hospital showcasing the weapons and explosives, indicating the usage of the hospital by militants as their hiding place.

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[2] https://time.com/6549544/israel-and-hamas-the-media-war/

Getting the world to listen is one thing and convincing people is another. The simple agenda of Hamas is, 'the worse, the better'. According to the Palestine Health Ministry, controlled by Hamas, more than 24,000 civilians have been killed, there is no clear distinction between civilians and combatants. While stating this, Hamas has specifically emphasised women and children, which acts as negative PR for Israel. Thousands of images and videos of corpses, and mothers holding their dead children have flooded social media. This has been amplified by Hamas supporters and also circulated on Chinese and Russian social media. There is a growing feeling of anti-semitism through protests on college campuses and streets across the world. The words like 'flattened', 'erased', and 'destroyed' used by Israeli officials have been used by Hamas to showcase how Israel is anti-Islamic and has gathered support for fighting for its religion. Hamas has constantly used civilians as human shields on the field and off the field. As more civilians die, more people sympathise with Hamas as the heart takes over the brain. Hamas has successfully played the role of underdog sympathy which has increased its support base.

Hamas has been clearly on the forefront when it comes to information warfare. Israel may continue to justify its actions, but the more the civilians die, the more the Israeli side turns black. It has started losing its international support as countries may condemn terrorism but can't stand the massacre. Take the example of India, which has always opposed terrorism but has also agreed to the call for a ceasefire in Gaza. The more one loses international support, it becomes difficult to achieve its goal. While standing against civilian deaths is verified, standing for Hamas, which is a terrorist organisation with primarily a Jihadis agenda, can backfire on the world itself. If the Hamas cause is allowed to win, Israel's national security is prone to more such surprise attacks in the future, proving its survival in the region a challenge.

5. Polarisation of Indian society over the Israel-Hamas conflict

India is a wounded civilization. There have been massacres after massacres, invasions, conversions, killing of Kashmiri Pandits, denial of Manipur Rights, several terrorist attacks, partition, and whatnot. When Hamas attacked Israel there was certainly an anger created in the minds of Indians, here especially Hindus as the country has undergone a similar situation in the past. Indians were at the forefront of sympathising with Israelis. When talking about Indian society's views over the Israel-Hamas conflict, we come across polarised views, with a diverse population comes a diverse set of views. Talking of Hindus, they consider themselves similar to Jews. For the world, a Hindu is a jew before the holocaust. They are harmonised people, who believe in democracy, peaceful living, multicultural, and good people. They are supposed to stay the same and the minute they try to raise their voice against injustice like Jews in the case of the holocaust, they are to be divided under the influence.

This is not applicable today, with India's position in global order, in the aftermath of the attack of 7th October, there was a massive backlash from the Hindus on social media. There is a view

that the brutality of Hamas's attack on Israel also makes it easier to say that Hamas Muslims are terrorists. There has been a section on social media that recognizes itself as extreme right-wing and supports Israel's killing of Palestinians on the grounds of them being Muslims. In reality, they are only 2% of the population and the rest 98% are unaware and do not cater to such harsh views. And historically, Indians have never had any conflict with Jews. There hardly exists anti-semitism in India or any sociological hatred for Jews. The growing bromance between Modi and Netanyahu is also the reason for the average Indian being pro-Israeli. But that does not present them as anti-Palestine. There is a big difference between being anti-Hamas and anti-Palestine.

Now, for Indian Muslims, there are rumours of them getting persecuted soon and there is a feeling of terror and fear among Indian Muslims. Again these views are of English-speaking Muslims on social media and the ground reality differs. Indians have the least knowledge of the actual reality of the Israel and Hamas conflict and no one is going to go deep diving into history to search for facts. So the views that Hindus are anti-Palestine and Muslims in India are no longer safe is a tactic of false propaganda to create support for respective sides. What concerns one is that these false views can affect national security and internal peace with radical organisations taking advantage and brainwashing the youth. The views showcased can lead to internal division in the society, whose benefit can be used by terrorists to sorrow seeds of intemperance.

6. India's urge to strike a balance between 'values' and 'interest' in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict

When the world stance is shifting between being pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, India seems to be riding the same boat. Over the 4 long months since the start of the war, while Israel's actions at the onset of the war were justified, the huge massacres of civilians that have followed post-it have turned the tables against it. While every country has showcased intolerance towards terrorism, Israel's actions have been no less than the former. This has led to pro-Palestine narratives rising around, indirectly to an extent supporting Hamas' cause. India, an emerging power in Asia, is seen climbing a tightrope while showcasing its position on the Israel-Hamas war. After the attack on 7th October, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was quick to support Israel and condemn any form of terrorism. These were the sole responses that represented India, it was only after a few days that the external ministry quoted on the war saying that international laws should be respected and that it calls for a two-state solution. Even in mid-November, India abstained at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), on a resolution that called for a 'humanitarian truce'. These early developments did indicate India leaning towards Israel. India's tilt towards Israel could be seen because of growing bilateral relations since the arrival of the Modi government in 2014, increasing defence and trade

relations, and an incident to showcase that India is against any form of terrorism and there is a need for defence cooperation on the global front. But with the increasing death toll in Gaza, India seems to again adopt the de-hyphenated policy, which it has followed for the last 9 years. In December India voted in favour of a UNGA resolution that called for a 'humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and pushed the two-state solution as the way to pause the ongoing war'. With a de-hyphenated policy, India aims to separate the Indo-Israeli cooperation from the Palestine cause. In this way India could harness with full potential its interest with Israel on its merit, while upholding the human rights value and calling for a ceasefire, abiding by international law. The reason for such a policy is very clear. India's stand on Israel-Hamas shapes its relations with other nations too. Since 2014, India has developed strong bilateral relations with Arab states in the Middle East. Recently, due to the warming of relations between Israel and Arab states several economic and social strategies were formed like, India-Middle East Food Corridor in 2022 and India-Middle East Economic Corridor in 2023. But with the onset of war, these policies may have to temporarily be put on stand, due to growing criticisms by Arab countries over the strikes in Gaza. India in this situation has to have a balanced stand as despite shelving these projects, it must continue to have strong bilateral relations with both parties. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are India's third and fourth largest trading partners, and there might be an India-Israel collaboration on issues of terrorism in the future further strengthening the ties. Thus India seems to be walking a tightrope on the diplomatic front and focusing on bilateral relations that would not affect its relations with other partners. A balanced stand on the Israel-Hamas conflict further mitigates its internal threats. Although Indian Muslims have no historical relations with Palestinian Muslims, the growing international affiliation, drawing links of similarities between Hinduism and Zionism, and portrayal of how their common enemy is Islam, will hurt Indian Muslims. With the upcoming national elections, India is voicing out for a two-state solution, while strongly opposing terrorist activities, giving assurance to Indian Muslims, and securing both Hindu and Muslim votes. Thus India's recent stand has been able to maintain diplomatic relations internationally without drawing much criticism and has managed to uphold its principles and values of world peace and avoiding wars, while also securing its interests internally. With the war continuing, India must hold on to its position firmly.

7. **A new lease to terrorist threat in India: A look at protest since the onset of War.**

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict on 7th October, there have been protests worldwide either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine. India has been no exception, with society being polarised and divided over whom to support. On 27th October 2023, the Indian Union Muslim League held a large pro-Palestine rally in Kerala, where thousands participated with slogans of

'Save Palestine, Save Humanity'. The participants also chanted 'Down with Zionism', calling out Israel as the biggest terrorist nation in the world and a call to end the genocide in Gaza. The event was also attended by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, and the protest concluded that the Hamas defending its rights was portrayed as terrorism. In Kashmir, the Indian authorities have banned any pro-Palestine protests. According to Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, a resistance leader, "From the Muslim perspective, Palestine is very dear to us, and we essentially have to raise our voice against the oppression there. But we are forced to be silent."[3] There have been pro-Palestine rallies organised by Muslim organisations and Universities across the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, and West Bengal. A pro-Palestine rally in Kerala was addressed by former Hamas leader, Khaled Mashal that called for unity with Gaza. Among the major reactions to the Israel-Hamas war happened in New Delhi. A low-intensity blast was reported behind the Israeli embassy in New Delhi on 27th December. Although no casualties were witnessed, the Delhi Police found a letter threatening revenge with phrases like resistance to Zionism and references to Gaza and Palestine. No suspects were identified behind the attack, but it came amidst the ongoing Israel-Hamas war and was anti-Israeli. Speaking about the pro-Israeli rallies, there haven't been any prominent ones, but a trend did surface on social media where, especially Hindus were posting content saying if Gazans were quiet while there was genocide of Kashmiri Pandits happening in Kashmir, why should Indians show support towards killing in Palestine. Neverthless they existed only in the initial months and currently the Indians seem to be normalised and not much bothered with the events unfolding in Gaza. The anti-Israeli protests and attacks are in reality not pro-Palestine but pro-Hamas in nature. It's high time common citizens start to differentiate between Pro-Hamas and Pro-Palestine. The protests had support and funding from foreign and domestic powers, to shake the current government in power, basically portrayed as pro-Israeli. But rallying with the slogans of 'Down with Zionism', showcases the agendas of Hamas, a literal terrorist organisation. The other view of this seems that these rallies justify and agree with the 7th October incident, a terrorist at its core. Is the Indian Congress in support of the ideology of the destruction of Zionism? If all this is for Muslim vote bank politics then, the stunt seemed a complete failure as the majority population remained unhampered, rather increased their support for Israel, since India has experienced events similar to 7th October like 26/11. Indians are not concerned about what the actual history of Israel-Palestine is, but the fact that Israel can take a stand against terrorism, makes Indians polarised towards Israel and the reason the Indian government showed firm solidarity with Israel.

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[3] https://www.tbsnews.net/hamas-israel-war/india-bars-protests-support-palestinians-736226

8. Domestic Vigilant Security Policy towards Curbing Terrorist Radicalization.

The war does not seem to end anytime soon. There was shuttle diplomacy to push a ceasefire and stop the war, but the effects have been negligible. Hence, it is a need of the hour that countries focus on how to mitigate the spillover effects of the war. War is an alarming indicator of the rise of terrorism as a threat matrix around the world. And as the world tries to combat it, so does India. Although India has maintained a neutral stance, in pan-Islamist terrorist propaganda, India is generally associated with the side of Israel. Interrogation revealed that recruits added to Lashkar e Taiba (LeT), a terrorist group in Jammu and Kashmir were radicalised by showing them a video of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Israeli crackdown on Palestine protests. With Indian government bans on pro-Palestine rallies in Kashmir, it can be further used by these organisations, to create anger and Islamophobia in people's minds and expand their network of work. The so-called pro-Palestine rallies that justify Hamas' cause can further radicalise the vulnerable youth in India and add recruitment to terrorist organisations. The Indian security establishment notes that the development in West Asia, and the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the Israel-Palestine war have provided new enthusiasm and aim to terrorist organisations to expand their scope and increase terrorist propaganda. Their efforts can be seen as backed by opposition parties and foreign agencies just to showcase the current government's failure in handling the situation. The dichotomy between Hindus and Muslims in India can pave the way for terrorist organisations to sympathise through self radicalization of individuals and support Indian Muslims to justify their cause. The Kashmir issue can intensify the threats, with it containing similarities with the Israel-Palestine conflict. It can be used to gather support even from foreign powers opposing India and justify terrorist acts in Kashmir. A video of Farhatullah Ghori, a terrorist previously associated with Let has been circulating on platforms addressing the Indian Muslims to unite with ummah in its fight against Israel. The videos circulating from the Gaza Strip are used by terrorist organisations to continuously portray that something similar might happen to Indian Muslims soon and used to radicalise them into acts of violence against India. The Home Ministry has so far been successful in keeping the terrorism in India under check but the war can escalate the threats further.

9. Recommendations

1. **Focus on Bilateral Relations in a de-hyphenated manner** - India's relation with Israel, as well as Arab states, necessitates it to take more of a balanced stance. Ties between, US and India are improving, while the former has been backing Israel, in the current conflict. India must prioritise bilateral ties. It must engage with Israel on its merit and keep the Palestine issue de-hyphenated, in a similar deal with Arab nations on related matters like renewable energy. This puts India's impression as Vishawamitra and not Israel leaning.

2. **Support a Two-State Solution** - The idea for a two-state solution in the case of Israel-Hamas is a long-overdue promise. To stop the ongoing war, again the only solution that the world demands is a separate state for Palestine. While it seems nearly impossible that Israel may agree to it, India must stand with the two-state solution towards ending the war. The impression it creates, internationally as well as domestically is that India does not adhere to the operations of the Gazans and that it voices for free Palestine. This would reduce the possible dilutions in the minds of Indian Muslims, of India turning Islamophobic, and would reduce the number of self-radicalised and thereby the threats to national security.

3. **Use of AI in Counter-Terrorism Policy** - AI is the ability of computer-based technologies to think critically and perform the tasks that usually humans do. Major security establishments are making use of AI worldwide and India must also adopt it, due to the increasing volatility of terrorism in South Asia and South-East Asia. AI has the ability to sort through millions of data and provide authorities with relevant attack methods in advance, it is useful in identifying suspicious behaviour online and when combined with robotics it can act faster and reduce loss of life. Following are some measures that can be adopted with the use of AI

   - **Predictive Analytics for Terrorist Activities** - Filling an AI model with large quantities of terrorist organisation data, could be used to identify or forecast the future behaviour of terrorists which is helpful for security and intelligence agencies.
   - **Identifying signs of Radicalisation** - AI-powered technology could be used to identify individuals who are at risk of radicalization on online platforms. It can be used for instance to identify keywords and search for extremist content that indicates a state of radicalization.
   - **Countering Violent Extremism Narratives** - AI useful for identifying signs of radicalization can direct individuals to content on counter-terrorism narratives.

4. **A need for a national Counter Violence Extremism (CVE) Policy** - India under the Ministry of Home Affairs has a Counter Terrorism and Counter Radicalisation Division. The main policies under this division are to detect, disrupt, and degrade the operations of terrorist organisations. There is a need for India to take the lead in developing a national CVE policy or national CVE coordinator, since the above division deals more with the prevention of terrorist activities. In contrast, a CVE policy would focus on avoiding the emergence of ideologies that lead to violent extremism. The former deals more with the law and order perspective.

- **Provisions** - CVE policy should come under the Ministry of Home Affairs, and a separate agency could be formed for the same. CVE is a soft approach.
- **Rationale** - CVE policy aims to prevent radical (Islamic) terrorism from taking root in communities and discourage the recruitment of youth in terrorist organisations. There is a lack in the current military approach, that fails to tackle underlying ideologies, grievances, and motives that encourage recruitment. CVE is a prevention policy.
- **Key Partners** - The Indian Muslim community would be a key partner in the country's CVE efforts. The government would not be the sole player; NGOs and community organisations must also be included.
- **Objectives of CVE** - Identifying the push and pull factors that lead to violent extremism. Push factors could be socio-economic grievances, ethical tensions, or government actions, and pull factors could be psychological and ideological and coming up with policy measures for same, delinking religious orthodoxy from extremism, running school programs, educating dangers of extremism, psychological rehabilitation and continuous assessment of the detainees, and controlling online extremist propaganda.

10. Conclusion

The internal voice in the country erupted by the Israel-Hamas war is likely to remain for some time as the country is headed towards general elections.[4] What matters is to condense the rift between Hindus and Muslims in the country, and reduce the misunderstandings arising from the narratives of war. This directly lowers the brainwashing of individuals whose actions may hamper national security. India has to take secure and safe steps internationally and domestically while lowering the impact of terrorist radicalisation in India. The war may continue as it happened with Ukraine-Russia, there are influences from other states to join either side, but the balanced approach that India has maintained is gonna save it from any damages at home. India must further emphasise its de-hyphenated policy, which sustains its relation with every country, despite ideological differences and does not make itself economically vulnerable. India needs to be highly vigilant and cautious in terms of its policy for the neighbouring country Pakistan. India must tighten its borders with Pakistan, especially after the war has led to a rift between Pakistan and Iran. Both these countries do not share cordial relations with India, are home to several terrorist organisations, and even backed them. In such a situation, there chances of an attack on India, or radicalising Indian youth and

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[4] India-Middle East Relations Unsettled by Israel-Hamas Conflict by Alvite Ningthoujam

increasing recruitment are high. A need for well-connected and advanced intelligence is what India needs to be prepared with for advance information and to avoid the repercussions in advance. India has managed to stay away from the burns of war at home. But with the elections approaching, the high chances of an event that can cause distress and fear in the common man's life cannot be ignored. Rather than terrorist organisations, a sharp look must be kept on the insiders who help the former to establish a base in the country. An eagle eye for such individuals must be kept, and when the rallies and protests that seem to be pro-Hamas in nature must be strictly banned a thorough investigation against them is needed. Lastly, today's India is not the one who will just mourn the attack that takes place on its soil, it has showcased its potential to hit back and give a befitting reply. This has certainly reduced the radical movements in the country. But with renewed terrorism and its benefactors, India needs a more vigilant and solid monitoring and security policy.

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