

Q&A with Indian National Security Adviser MK Narayanan

Indian National Security Adviser MK Narayanan has been an intelligence chief to three Indian prime ministers and is currently serving a fourth as security adviser.

He is involved in all key government decisions, from negotiating the civilian nuclear accord with Washington and leading the boundary talks with Beijing.

No policeman has ever risen to so much influence in India. Today, much of his time is spent on tackling the terrorist menacing stalking India.

In a 75-minute interview with The Straits Times India Bureau Chief Ravi Velloor on Saturday night at the Prime Minister's Office, Mr Narayanan covered a range of issues vital to Indian security.

What is India's next move in Afghanistan after your embassy there was bombed last month?

We will strengthen security very substantially. We are not going to abandon Afghanistan. Nor are we going to reduce our commitments in Afghanistan. Rather, we will increase. Most of it is related to reconstruction and rehabilitation anyway. We believe that is crucial for Afghanistan's democracy.

But we recognise we are under attack and one of the reasons is to get India out of Afghanistan. Quite obviously Pakistan wishes to be the only country in Afghanistan so it can have Afghanistan as its client state. That's something not only India but also the rest of the world is not prepared for.

Does that mean you will put Indian troops on the ground in Afghanistan?

No. That is a standard policy. We will not send our troops to any part of the world except for peacekeeping operations under the UN.

You have accused Pakistan's ISI of being responsible for that bombing. What was India's message to Pakistan PM Geelani in Colombo during the Saarc summit? What did Geelani say?

The meeting was cordial in the sense that all the optics were maintained. But PM Singh made it clear it could not be business as usual. What had happened in Afghanistan was fundamentally different from what had happened before.

An attack on an Indian embassy in a foreign hand clearly marked an entirely new stage in the levels of acrimony and violence. Therefore, we expect that something would be done rather than mere words. PM Singh didn't raise his voice but he left nobody in that room in any doubt where he stood. He had well memorised what he had to say and I think the message went home. Geelani got the message. Coming from the PM, I think it had the most devastating effect.

Let's wait and see what he can deliver. I agree it is not going to be easy because one isn't sure who is controlling all the levers in Pakistan.

But Pakistan categorically denies involvement...

We have never blamed the Pakistan political hierarchy about being involved in this. ISI is behind it, according to whatever information we have. We would expect that the (political leadership) would take some action against it. Either against rogue elements in it, or an ISI operating without control.

In any democratic country if an agency functions out of step with whatever political leadership believes in, the agency head or operational chief suffers. That would send some sort of a message across the spectrum. I don't whether that will happen in Pakistan.

How do you read the emerging political scenario there?

It is evolving in a manner nobody can quite reach a conclusion. We thought President Musharraf's impeachment might not take place. And if at all he has to go, he will be allowed to go in grace and some sort of a compromise would be reached. Obviously that is not happening. Mr Nawaz Sharif is very angry and there is no doubt about it.

Large numbers in the Pakistan People's Party are unhappy about Benazir's assassination. Most of them also attribute it to ISI or some such agency. While Mr Zardari may be more conciliatory towards Musharraf the general temper seems to be otherwise.

Whether he is impeached or not is not important from the Indian point of view. It is for the people of Pakistan to decide. But it leaves a big vacuum and we are deeply concerned about this vacuum because it leaves the radical extremist outfits with freedom to do what they like, not merely on Pak-Afghan border but clearly our side of the border too. Like Nature abhors a vacuum, we abhor the political vacuum that exists in Pakistan. It greatly worries us.

How serious is the situation on the Control Line in Kashmir? And why is it happening?

There has been increased infiltrations, increased activity and of course there have been firings across the Line of Control. Pakistan denies it but clearly that is not the truth.

So, is the four-year old Composite Dialogue process with Pakistan dead?

We are maintaining and would like to emphasise the importance of composite dialogue. Up to at least early 2007 it seemed to be working. We do not wish to interrupt that dialogue. But dialogue is only as good as the kind of people who have the capacity to deliver on what they can promise. In any case the resumption of the dialogue at the foreign secretaries level, which took place after the Kabul attack, did not happen in the most propitious of circumstances. It was a rather formal, cold affair. We wish to keep the dialogue on but it depends on if the other side has the capacity to deliver on more than empty words.

What about the Bangalore and Ahmedabad blasts? Any new clues to who are the people behind it? What was the message behind those blasts?

We are concerned that while there is a great deal of external inspiration and support. We are also concerned and are looking at a mastermind within the country. One of the things we had hoped would not occur was that local elements would not get sucked into the worldwide movement of terrorist and Al Qaeda related.

If you look at the nature of the blasts, several bombs of different intensities but great deal of complementarities and similarities in terms of triggering devices and nature of explosives and casings used.

Clearly there is some kind of organisation. We have to find out if that organisation is localised or there is an external group or module that is operating. There are several modules that we have disrupted. Some of these modules are not entirely foreign. So we have to wait and see whether there is something bigger.

Our challenge is to pre-empt these attacks. Let me tell you that there have been 800 modules we have disrupted over the past four years. When you disrupt one of them, we don't go public. Press will call it a publicity stunt. Obviously some are getting away and there are quite a few under the scanner at the moment.

We are hoping to disrupt them. We are trying to do this as democratically as possible despite occasional complaints of targeting of minorities or profiling of people. Certainly no profiling is taking place.

What we do lack at the moment is a little more support at the ground level. A, in terms of police reporting, and B, in terms of people reporting. Quite clearly a number of bombs are being planted, some of it can be detected. This degree of support is not forthcoming in some areas. We are against much more.

Copycat systems are coming up. Like putting bombs in vehicles near hospitals soon after blasts, knowing that large congregations will be there and impact will be much greater. So all over the world, there is this kind of effort at increasing level of terror and sophistication of methodology and triggering devices. All this indicates that much more high-grade people are involved in the effort.

So now local Indians are involved with the terror attacks clearly?

Difficult to say locals are not involved. In Jaipur, cycles used for the blasts were bought from a series of shops. The extent to which locals are involved, whether they are mercenaries or part of the set up, is what we are trying to unravel.

Is the heightened terror attacks on India in any way linked to the emerging strategic relationship with the US?

No. I don't think it is anything to do with the US or any other country. There is a sort of rage on various issues. What for, very few people can understand. We have not seen any evidence of this being linked to our closeness to the US.

You led the negotiations on the civilian nuclear deal with Washington. Having cleared the IAEA, the deal will soon come up before the Nuclear Suppliers Group for clearance. Will it clear NSG?

We are hopeful. If you take what happened in the IAEA, when board of governors debated the India specific safeguards agreement, some countries took a strong line, particularly on the non-proliferation front.

That is the central theme of the objections. I am not referring to China. Smaller countries brought up on heavy dose of non-proliferation (raised doubts). India's impeccable record (on non-proliferation) has been made clear.

Wherever we have talked individually they have understood India is unique in many ways. We are hopeful (of getting NSG clearance). Further efforts are being made before NSG consultation process and much of the support which has come, aside from US, UK, France, Russia is because many people see India as a country with a future, one already on the scene. And they feel comfortable with it and want a good relationship.

Most of them recognise that the major constraint in our nation's progress is absence of clean energy and energy at affordable prices. That's the line we have projected and it has gone down well with 95 percent of the countries. We have a small number worried about non-proliferation. If we can get over that, we are over the hill.

Much of that will also depend on what kind of persuasion US, France and others can bring to bear. We don't probably have in NSG the kind of ally we had in the IAEA, like its Director General, Mr Al Baradei. It was a stellar performance from Al Baradei, on how not only India, but world at large will benefit from this agreement. If somebody could make a similar kind of speech in NSG and with same degree of authority we would have had it made.

If you could rewrite one clause in the India US 1,2,3 Agreement, which would it be?

This was a negotiation. In any negotiation both sides have to compromise. We had three or four basic issues. Unlike many others, we need to reprocess fuel. It's a small thing now but if you are to have a large number of reactors we will have huge amounts of spent fuel. So we require reprocessing. It was a very, very hard sort of discussion and we could get that. And I must give great credit to my counterpart Stephen Hadley. But it clearly also had the support of Secretary of State Rice and President Bush, because of his equation with Prime Minister Singh.

There was maybe a concession we made in saying we will then set up a dedicated reprocessing facility under safeguards. It is a bit of extra cost from our point of view but that was necessary. Then there are issues of reprocessing technology, which US will not give but we would like to get.

Much has been made of this issue of testing. We have a voluntary moratorium on testing. We have no intention of breaking that moratorium unless circumstances compel us. If circumstances compel, whether 1,2,3 agreement existed or not, we would do it because it is in our supreme national interest. I think it is a non-issue.

And we recognise that if you do unilaterally test there will be international repercussions. The 1,2,3 contains provisions to discuss why you have tested: is it because the security situation has undergone a change etc In this case the US has said that before ceasing cooperation they will examine why a particular thing was done.

The one thing we didn't really get out of it was enrichment and reprocessing technology, which the US does not give anybody. Hopefully, as time progresses we will get that.

Frankly speaking, we could get this elsewhere if it is necessary. In the years when we were banned from the global nuclear trade we had to do everything ourselves, so obviously we don't need to do that (once India gets NSG clearance).

What is China's attitude on this?

We can only go by what people say and their body language. President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, at every meeting they have had with PM when the issue has been raised, they have indicated that they will not be a problem.. That happens when they meet and even in telephone conversations. Pakistan did its damndest to block us in IAEA but China took a very correct position.

The Indian and Chinese leaders talk on the phone so much?

From time to time, they do talk. I won't say frequent, but not infrequent either. It happens on various occasions. After PM Singh won the confidence vote in parliament last month, for instance. Thereafter, the leaders talked. India is the flavour of little more than the month, I would say..(laughing). So, lot of people talk to us.

What else do they talk about?

I think PM Singh has never lost an opportunity to talk of this (nuclear) matter, and food security I would say. They bring in WTO. India and China also talk of climate change because they are bracketed in same category.

You lead the Special Representatives talk with China on the border issue. Why have the talks on the border gone cold?

They have not gone cold. Far from it. Last six months they put everything on hold. Next month we will be holding the talks. It is my turn to go across. We were supposed to meet earlier this year but my counterpart Dai Bingguo was getting upgraded. So, there was doubt whether he would be the interlocutor. By the time that got settled they got into the Olympic mode. We have been in touch. We are very comfortable, quite happy with the progress we have made.

Has it come to a stage where crunch issues like exchange of territory are being discussed?

We are working toward an agreed framework. Five or six points, the more difficult points are settled. What is important is that areas of convergence are increasing. But areas of divergence remain. Tawang, in Arunachal Pradesh state, remains the most important. Till that is settled whatever else we may do, it is difficult to say we have crossed the rubicon. When they talk in terms of movement forward, they keep arguing Tawang has always been a part of Tibet, which is a matter of debate.

Is there new thinking on your side on Tawang?

We have an agreement that areas of settled populations are not negotiable. Tawang is an area with substantial settled populations. Not a small number. It flies in the face of guiding principles and political parameters (for China to demand it). How we work out... whether I have the ingenuity or Mr Dai has the flexibility, we will see.

Indian Army has been complaining of Chinese infringements on the border. What are you doing about all this?

Chinese have been a little more assertive in all the areas that are treated as disputed. They have been careful not to intrude into any area which is either not disturbed or which by their very careful assessment does not fall within what they regard as their area. But we don't realise why they should increase the frequency of their visits to the areas.

The areas they are visiting are exactly the same as they done over the years but the numbers in the last year or so have gone up. Gone up in many areas and gone down in some areas. We have not been able to fathom this but once again I would take the views of the political leadership.

On this, and even more than on the NSG issue, the political leadership is absolutely clear we will maintain peace and tranquillity. Yes there will be instances of this kind. We haven't settled the border. It's not demarcated or delineated. There will always be a certain amount of discomfort. We are careful. I was one of those present in 1962 (when India and China fought a war). We don't wish to do something which would aggravate the situation from either side.

Chinese side has taken note of that. So both sides are comfortable with that. Definitely our army is making a fair amount of noise. We are conscious of it. The instructions are that you cannot be complacent because you have to guard our border. From our side there will be no provocative action.

India has been so involved with the ethnic war in Sri Lanka. In your assessment is the war nearing an end?

The (Sri Lankan army) has made a lot of progress in the last few weeks. But even if they win the battle I am not sure they will win the war. I think they haven't got the Tamil population on their side. I know the Sri Lankan government will be unhappy (at this advice) but we are not interested in preaching to them and that is the best advice they could get. India can give this advice better than the Norwegians or any other country. These are people that we know, we understand. Do they want a situation like many

countries have faced? Iraq is a good example. What we are telling them is, get the Tamils on your side by greater devolution of power. For them to be part of Sri Lankan state, they need the huge Tamil minority on their side. Obviously the Tamil Tigers have been weakened, they have met with heavier casualties than previously.

Recruitment has become difficult, so younger and younger elements coming into it. All signs are that they are having problems. They are also hurting because of the ban in many western countries, so they have problems in fund collection, movement of arms. What the Sri Lankans are not factoring in is the great deal of sullenness in the Tamil man. There are accusations of profiling even in Colombo.

Our argument is: unless you give Tamils a feeling they have the right to their own destiny in many matters you will not succeed. LTTEs capacity to carry out terrorist attacks is not diminished.

Maoists in the jungles are said to have a presence in 140 districts of India. What is your short-term strategy to control the Maoists?

Problem in dealing with Maoists is we haven't been able to break their intellectual appeal that they seem to still have. In the 60s and early 70s it was of a different nature. During that period the flower of the universities joined them. Maybe you were yourself a part of the Red brigade. It started as a challenge to the embourgeoisment of the communist party.

Today there is no central issue, yet large numbers of the intellectual elite and civil liberties bodies provide a backup to the movement in terms of agitprop and other activities. Maoists also have become much more militarised. People talk of their influence in 150 districts, but it certainly is not of that order. But that even while being militarised and committing the most heinous crimes, they are still able to get support of intellectual classes is disturbing.

Unless we can divorce the two it is not that easy. One of the great things you have to give us credit for is there is hardly any talk of human rights violations. We haven't used helicopter gunships despite the Maoists being entrenched in the jungles and so on.

Is there outside support?

We have not seen any kind of infusion of arms or ammunition. They have a coordination committee and talk in terms of links with Peru's Shining Path and all that. There is a certain amount of educated elite that are part of the movement and that gives them a connection to the outside world.