

Air Marshal Brijesh Jayal cautions that the Rafale and surgical strike political-gaming must not hurt our ability to wage war

Carl von Clausewitz was a military theorist who stressed the moral and political aspects of war. His treatise ‘On War’ is considered standard text to military doctrine and is study material in military leadership establishments across democracies. The text has many aphorisms, of which the most famous is: “War is the continuation of politics by other means.” Politics here refers to the larger principle of governance, of guiding or influencing government policy with the welfare of the state in mind.

It is unlikely that a majority of practitioners of politics in our democracy today would have heard of this text, let alone have enlightened themselves on its finer points. Considering the current level of political discourse, it is doubtful whether they even comprehend the difference between this higher aim of politics and electoral politics, which today appears far removed from the interest of welfare of the state.

The reason why this text needs to be mentioned is because, of late, Indian electoral politics, through which the process of national governance is born, appears to be wounding the state’s instrument of war, namely the military. In this convoluted manner, our ability to wage war is becoming a victim of politics by other means.

This brings us down from the exalted heights of a classical text to the mundane level of national dailies, where two competing narratives are currently vying for public attention.

The first was a directive issued to universities and higher educational institutions across the country by the University Grants Commission to observe 29 September as the ‘Surgical Strike Day’ and to “celebrate this in a befitting manner by conducting various activities.”

It will be recalled that on this day two years ago, in response to a militant attack army personnel in J&K in which 19 army personnel lost their lives, the Indian Army had undertaken surprise attacks by special



forces on seven terror launch pads along the Line of Control and inflicted significant damage. Such operations by their very nature carry an element of surprise, are conducted by special forces and carry a very high level of risk to those involved. They are also meant to convey a subtle message to the adversary – but are not advertising tools.

This action in later public discourse came to be termed ‘surgical strike’, and, rather than be considered as another tactical action by the army in the face of a decades-long proxy war in J&K, it seems to have been adopted by the government as a landmark event justifying commemoration. By glorifying one specific tactical action over others, we undermine the dangers, challenges, successes and sacrifices that our soldiers are facing and making on a daily basis including the conduct of such high risk actions where necessary. This may appear good political optics, but it is bad for the morale of those in the daily line of fire.

Regrettably, a tactical commando action has now become the subject of political one-

upmanship. This bodes ill not just for the morale of the force but also their respect for the moral values of the civil leadership under whose authority they derive their legitimacy to serve and fight, and to kill if necessary.

The second narrative being played out is the very vocal and concerted attempt by the opposition to label the recent government-to-government agreement for the purchase of much needed combat aircraft to shore up IAF’s seriously depleting force level, as involving corruption and cronyism.

So ugly has the Rafale debate become that the IAF top brass have indirectly jumped into an unfortunate political fray.

It may be recalled that towards meeting the IAF’s requirement for a medium multi-role combat aircraft, the MoD had floated a global tender for 126 aircraft in 2007 after having floated the first ‘Request for Information’ as early as 2004. After comprehensive technical and flight evaluations, the GOI shortlisted two aircraft and after due commercial process, identified the French Rafale as the “winner” in 2012.