

## Four steps to foil the terrorists' design

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Who wouldn't be gutted by the horrific images from Pahalgam, where terrorists butchered innocent civilians? Who wouldn't feel rage at such brutality? There is grief and rage — and a thirst for accountability, for justice.

Some will clamour for swift revenge, to teach someone a lesson. The terrorists count on exactly this. In the age of TV and social media, every strike is planned with full knowledge of the kind of emotional reaction it might trigger. And often, in our grief and fury, we play into their hands, doing exactly what they want us to do. Our success against terrorism is not measured by how angry we get or how quickly we hit back — it's about how well we understand and foil their real objectives.

The attack was likely timed to coincide with the visit of US vice-president J.D. Vance. The masterminds of the attack must hope it will spark a political slugfest, pit ruling and opposition parties against each other, and broadcast India's vulnerability to the world.

That is why our first duty is to avoid the blame game. Be it deaths at a religious gathering or a stampede at a railway station — any tragedy followed immediately by political mudslinging instead of collective mourning is not just distasteful, it is damaging. This is a time to stand with the grieving families — not to settle political scores. When such games are played after a terror attack, they are worse than tasteless; they are a gift to the enemy.

Of course, the BJP has indulged in exactly this sort of politics in the past — Narendra Modi famously held a press conference in Mumbai amidst the 2009 attacks, publicly attacking the UPA government. But if it was wrong then, it would be wrong now, too. There will be a time to demand accountability, but now is not the time.

This is not a moment to demand resignations from governors, chief ministers, home ministers or the prime minister. If we truly want to defeat terrorism, Indians of all stripes — across parties, ideologies and divides — need to stand united. In that sense, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's public statement and Rahul Gandhi's call to home minister Amit Shah offering support are steps in the right direction.

The terrorists' second goal was likely to push India-Pakistan tensions to the brink. Public anger would pressure the Indian government into a rash retaliation. Border tensions would rise. In Pakistan, that would strengthen the military's hand and give the terror lords more power and cover. If we want to foil that plan, we must not push the government into performative retaliation.

A Pakistan-based terror group has claimed responsibility for the massacre in Pahalgam, and it is already clear the attack has cross-border links. The Indian government will have to respond — but knee-jerk action taken under pressure may grab headlines and even win votes but it does not crush terror networks.

After the 2009 Mumbai attacks, the UPA government did not indulge in sabre-rattling; instead it worked silently to isolate Pakistan globally, branding it a state that sponsored terrorism. The lesson? Rather than cornering the government into a show of strength, we must make space for the military, the intelligence agencies and diplomats to respond in the right way, at the right time.

The third layer of the terrorists' plot possibly aimed to widen the rift between Kashmir and the rest of India. If we scapegoat ordinary Kashmiris for the horrors unleashed by militants operating at the ISI's behest, we play right into the enemy's hands.

The truth is: this attack was a direct blow to the livelihood of Kashmiris. This year had seen a sharp uptick in tourist footfall in the Valley — and this massacre was meant to choke that flow. As a result, Kashmir's biggest income stream is now in jeopardy, and thousands of families face economic ruin.

Kashmiris, too, are victims of this terror. Bravehearts like Syed Hussain Shah laid down their lives fighting the attackers. Kashmiri political parties have unequivocally condemned the killings. For the first time, there was a total shutdown in the Valley against a terror attack, with messages condemning the carnage broadcast from mosques. If we show maturity now, this tragedy could even be turned into a moment that brought Kashmir and the rest of India closer, delivering in the process a resounding blow to the terrorists' designs.

But the darkest and most sinister goal of the Pahalgam terrorists was to ignite a Hindu-Muslim conflict within India. Their victims were selected based on religion — they deliberately picked and murdered Hindus. The strategy was plain: they were counting on copycats in India. Just as they killed in the name of religion, they hoped others would follow suit. Their grand design was to plunge India into the flames of communal hatred.

Which is why anyone who — in the name of avenging Pakistani terror — spews venom against Indian Muslims, anyone who identifies a person's faith from their name or clothes, becomes a pawn in the terrorists' game. The Pahalgam massacre was engineered to stoke hate in India. The strongest possible reply we can give is to recommit ourselves to Hindu-Muslim unity — to ensure that communal fires are not allowed to spread, anywhere.