Bringing politics back in

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It must not be evicted from the public sphere on issues of national security

- In the wake of the Pulwama terror attack last month, politicians and opinion makers made impassioned pleas that 'terror attacks should not be politicised'.
- Unsurprisingly, the demand for dialling down politics was proportional to the demands for increased militarisation.
- The trust in politicians was replaced with an abiding belief that the men in uniform would save the day for India.
- For a proudly and deeply democratic country such as India, this scorn for politics is both perplexing and worrying.

Politicising terrorism?

- The calls for refraining from politicising acts of terror also apply to most matters of national security.
- What is puzzling about such assertions is that most serious analysts and thoughtful politicians intuitively recognise that, at the end of the day, political solutions are the best answer to conflicts.
- For the general public, this results in weariness over how the political class has managed national security problems.
- In that sense, then, the aversion towards politics, especially in times of crisis, is essentially a function of the failure of the way in which politics and political debates are practised, not a negation of politics per se.
- The solution is to offer better political reasoning, and not replace political formulations with military ones, which is often seen as the easy way out.
- Popular narratives about solutions to our contemporary security problems demand the adoption of militaristic or securitised solutions as if the military has some superior capability for conflict resolution that politics doesn't.
- The problem with privileging military solutions over political ones while

dealing with conflict resolution is that the former use a specific set of tools, discourses and methods to resolve conflicts unlike the toolkit politics uses for conflict resolution.

- Militarised methods and narratives also lead to de-politicisation, or the dismissal of normal politics from the public sphere, ushering in what could be called 'temporary emergencies'.
- Privileging militarisation over politicisation for conflict resolution is indeed unwise and counter-productive, an insight enshrined in the Clausewitzian dictum that war is the "continuation of politics by other means".
- When divorced from their underlying political intent, militarised approaches can lead to mindless violence — something democratic societies should unconditionally resist.
- Military means to deal with conflicts do have their limited utility, but they must be politically guided.

'Freedom to the military'

- Another reflection of depoliticising security matters is the tendency to argue that the armed forces should be given complete autonomy to deal with security problems.
- However, giving complete freedom to the military is replete with several complications, not the least of which is the indirect acknowledgement that the political class has failed to resolve the problem.
- For one, telling the armed forces that they are free to deal with the problem as they wish is a dangerous abdication of political responsibility which was entrusted to them through a democratic process.
- Second, 'giving complete freedom to the military' is an open invitation to use military solutions to deal with what are essentially political problems.
- Third, and even more important, 'complete freedom' flies in the face of political control that should be the hallmark of a mature democracy.
- It is one thing for the general public to nurture romantic notions about military solutions, but it is dangerous for the political class to actually enshrine that in policy guidance.
- One direct implication of de-politicised conflict resolution is that it typically leads to more violence.
- The fact is that every death due to violence must be avoidable, and that can only happen if statesmen and women are willing to climb down from the cycle of violence.
- But for that to happen, there must be a decidedly political approach to

conflict resolution.

Root cause theories

- There is also an entrenched popular aversion to using 'root cause theories' to explain conflicts around us.
- Not only are those attempting to explain conflicts by examining its root cases routinely shunned by impatient commentators, they are routinely viewed as apologists of non-state violence.
- While this antipathy towards root cause theorists is a function of depoliticised conflict narratives, it leads to further depoliticisation of conflicts.
- Depoliticised narratives aim to treat the symptoms, ignoring what gives rise to those symptoms — the latter is difficult, requires introspection and mending ways, while the former expects that military force can be used to end violence or resolve the problem at hand.
- Militarily framed responses to conflicts also deny justice since they can only be used to reinstate the state's 'monopoly over power', not to provide justice to the aggrieved parties in a conflict.
- Let's not forget that conflicts are a function of differing political values and expectations, and the only way sustainable conflict resolution can be achieved is by bringing politics back to negotiate those differences.

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