

Report on the 11th A.K. Dave Memorial Lecture

Organized by: Association of Retired Senior IPS Officers (ARSIPSO)

Venue: India International Centre, New Delhi

Date: May 9, 2025

Keynote Speaker: Shri N.N. Vohra, IAS (Retd.)

Topic: *National Security: Evolving Challenges and State Capacity*

1. Introduction

The 11th A.K. Dave Memorial Lecture was organized by ARSIPSO in association with the India International Centre to honor the memory of Shri A.K. Dave — an exemplary police officer and the founding president of ARSIPSO. This annual event serves as a platform for reflecting on pressing national issues through the lens of public service and institutional memory.

The keynote speaker was **Shri N.N. Vohra**, former Union Home Secretary, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, and Governor of Jammu & Kashmir (2008–2018). Shri Vohra drew on his decades of experience in public administration, security management, and constitutional governance to deliver a wide-ranging and incisive lecture on India's evolving security landscape.

2. Keynote Address: National Security — Evolving Challenges and State Capacity

2.1 Historical Reflections and Institutional Continuity

Shri Vohra opened by recalling the immediate post-Partition period and the early days of the Republic, noting the **immense efforts required to resettle refugees and maintain civil order**. He emphasized the **spirit of public service and administrative innovation** that characterized the 1950s and 1960s, when border regions were managed with limited resources but strong commitment.

He recounted his own involvement in the development of border management institutions such as the **Special Services Bureau (SSB)** and **Aviation Research Centre**, which were originally conceptualized to respond to the vulnerabilities exposed during the **Indo-China conflict of 1962**.

2.2 Geopolitical Terrain and Border Complexities

India shares a **14,880 km land border and 7,500+ km coastline** with seven neighboring countries, many of which have complex bilateral histories. Shri Vohra critiqued the **general lack of public understanding** about these borders and emphasized that **territorial security demands physical presence and strategic empathy**, not just digital surveillance.

He called for public awareness campaigns to **sensitize the citizenry** about India's real (de facto) borders versus claimed (de jure) boundaries — a prerequisite for national consensus in any future negotiations.

2.3 Persistent and Emerging Internal Threats

The speaker provided a sobering overview of India's ongoing internal security risks:

- **Cross-border terrorism** in Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab

- **Left-wing extremism** across central India
- **Insurgency and alienation** in the North-East
- **Religious radicalization**, cyber-enabled crime, and narcotics trafficking
- **Organized criminal-political nexus**, which he traced back to the post-1993 Mumbai bombings

Shri Vohra described these as not isolated but **interconnected challenges**, sustained in part by external state actors and internal institutional weaknesses.

2.4 Systemic Weaknesses and Political Interference

A significant part of his address focused on how the **politicization of policing**, **lack of functional autonomy**, and **frequent transfers** have eroded administrative efficiency.

“The tragedy is that we have become our own worst enemies... policies get sabotaged from within.”

He pointed to **short tenures** of key security officials, lack of **specialized cadres**, and the misallocation of trained officers to non-core responsibilities (e.g., pensions, hospitality) as signs of misgovernance. His longstanding proposal for a **National Security Administrative Service**, similar to an All-India cadre, was reiterated with urgency.

2.5 The Need for Federal-Union Synergy

While internal security is a state subject under the Constitution, Shri Vohra emphasized that **federal collaboration is indispensable**. He proposed:

- A **shared national security doctrine**
- Minimum two-year tenures for Home, Defense, and Foreign Secretaries
- A **national framework of accountability and coordination** across Union and state agencies

He highlighted that **political divergences** between Centre and states often paralyze action on agreed reforms.

2.6 Holistic Security Beyond Law Enforcement

He broadened the concept of national security to include:

- **Food, water, and environmental security**
- **Employment and economic stability**
- **Institutional trust and justice delivery**

Shri Vohra warned that over **5 crore pending legal cases** and millions of undertrial prisoners undermine public faith in the rule of law — a foundational pillar of internal peace.

3. Discussions and Reflections

Following Shri N.N. Vohra’s keynote address, a rich and thoughtful discussion ensued among the distinguished attendees, comprising retired IPS officers, former intelligence officials, senior

administrators, and members of ARSIPSO. The discussion underscored the value of institutional memory and on-the-ground experience in shaping national security narratives.

3.1 Key Discussion Themes

A. Radicalization and Narco-Terrorism Nexus

Multiple participants emphasized the evolving nature of threats in Punjab, pointing to a deepening nexus between narco-trafficking and religious extremism, allegedly funded and abetted by Pakistan's ISI.

- A retired intelligence officer described how Punjab has witnessed a recycling of Khalistani narratives—this time through social media and diaspora channels, unlike the earlier gun-and-gurdwara route.
- The influx of synthetic drugs was discussed as a multi-pronged threat impacting health, security, and youth demographics.

B. Erosion of State Police Autonomy

Participants concurred with Shri Vohra's critique of excessive political interference in police functioning. One senior officer noted:

"The problem is not just transfers. It's the slow hollowing out of professional integrity. Field officers can't act decisively when political pressure is immediate and local."

Another participant shared that District Magistrates and SPs often operate with unclear or overlapping mandates, leading to administrative paralysis in sensitive districts.

C. Role of Civil Society and Veterans

There was a strong consensus on the need to create institutional platforms for retired officers, civil society experts, and academic researchers to contribute to security policy.

- A former DGP suggested forming a National Security Advisory Fellowship, where experienced officers could mentor district administrators, especially in conflict-prone zones.
- Participants noted that younger officials lack a historical lens on insurgency, border management, or crisis recovery — something veterans could help impart.

D. Judicial Delays and Criminal Justice Breakdown

Another thread was the failure of the justice system to complement security operations. While arrests and seizures happen, prosecutions lag or collapse, especially in terror and drug-related cases.

- Several speakers linked this to overburdened courts, absence of specialized prosecutors, and inadequate coordination between police and judiciary.

E. National Security Doctrine and Strategic Clarity

A few participants questioned the absence of a publicly articulated National Security Doctrine. While doctrines may exist in classified circles, they argued that:

- Civil servants and police need a clear strategic framework for long-term planning.

- Public debates would benefit from coherence in priorities and language, especially in educational institutions and media.

4. Audience Q&A and Shri Vohra's Responses

The Q&A session brought forward pertinent and pointed questions from the floor, many rooted in lived experience and practical governance challenges.

4.1 Selected Questions and Issues Raised

i. Alienation in Kashmir and the Northeast

- One participant asked why, even after decades of intervention, alienation among youth in Kashmir and some parts of the Northeast remains unaddressed.
- He questioned whether the developmental approach has failed or been inadequately implemented.

ii. Systemic Lapses in Security Operations

- A retired officer referenced recent lapses in Belgaum, where weapons and ammunition theft was linked to insider negligence, raising the issue of security within forces themselves.

iii. Legal Framework vs. Execution

- Another participant noted that laws are in place, but implementation remains poor. He asked what prevents better synchronization between Home, Defense, and Judiciary.

iv. Mapping and Public Discourse on Borders

- A question was posed about why India doesn't officially distinguish between de facto and de jure borders in public narratives — especially in light of recent LAC tensions.

v. Engaging Retired Experts in Governance

- A widely appreciated query asked whether the government could formally include experienced retired officials as advisors in policy planning, beyond ad hoc committees.

4.2 Shri Vohra's Responses and Observations

Shri Vohra responded to the questions with characteristic candor and systemic insight:

- On alienation in Kashmir and the Northeast, he emphasized that without responsive governance and trust-building, no security apparatus alone can bridge alienation.

“You cannot win hearts with bunkers. You need schools, services, and dignity.”

- On security lapses, he admitted that many are preventable and stem from internal decay, complacency, or unaccountability, rather than capability gaps.
- Regarding the legal-judicial gap, he pointed out the massive underfunding of lower courts and lack of will to reform the trial process, which derails most high-profile cases.
- On map transparency, he agreed in principle but noted that public communication about borders must be calibrated and security-sensitive, to avoid international escalation.

- He strongly supported the idea of institutionalizing the advisory role of retired professionals, suggesting that ministries, especially Home and Defence, would benefit immensely from cross-generational institutional memory.

5. Conclusion

The 11th A.K. Dave Memorial Lecture provided not just a retrospective on India's security landscape but a compelling roadmap for future reforms. Shri N.N. Vohra's keynote was notable for its **depth, candor, and system-level analysis**, echoing decades of lived experience and public service.

Participants left with a renewed understanding of the **interdependence between state capacity, citizen awareness, and institutional integrity**. ARSIPSO's continuing efforts to bring critical national issues into public discussion were widely appreciated.

"We must move beyond abstract patriotism and invest in institutional realism," Shri Vohra concluded.