

Contextualizing the Pulwama Attack in Kashmir – A Perspective from Pakistan

by Muhammad Feyyaz

Abstract

Ever since its occurrence in mid-February 2019, the Pulwama incident has obsessively gripped Indian and Pakistani political circles and society alike. It has also remained at the centre of policy, security and opinionated analyses within and beyond South Asia. Ironically, most of these encounters, barring a few notable exceptions, have largely been ridden more by polemics underlying typical Indian and Pakistani nationalism and by partisan descriptions rather than being the product of a systematic analysis of the possible causes behind the incident, the cycle of reactions that it has produced and the ensuing very dangerous security implications. The present account contextualizes the incident within a broader, quite complex, and multi-tier national and geopolitical landscape, to determine its objective status, and reflects on a few broad policy implications.

Keywords: Kashmir, India, Pakistan, Pulwama, nuclear war

Introduction

Perhaps never before has a single violent act in the Indo-Pakistan context provoked reverberations of the same order as have ensued from the Pulwama bombing in Indian Held Kashmir (IHK) on 14 February 2019. In its essence, it was a simple act of violence by a Kashmiri perpetrator to exact a heavy toll of casualties from a contingent of Indian security forces. Although exceptional in terms of tactics, broadly speaking, the attack was also a continuation of an ongoing campaign of sub-conventional warfare in IHK.

If the target, the anatomy and the persistent nature of non-state violence which is traditionally tagged ‘terrorism’ by India and characterized as manifestations of a liberation movement by a majority of Kashmiris as well as by Pakistan, were not so unusual, why did Pulwama turn into something approaching national hysteria in India and a matter of socio-political security concern in Pakistan? The media, regional as well as international, have covered the event and its aftermath extensively. There have been numerous analyses by political dissidents, policy and security analysts published in foreign quality magazines and newspapers. In addition, the Pulwama incident significantly shaped the direction and mood of election campaigns in India, not to speak of the unrelenting propaganda battles that have since raged on official channels and in social media spaces between the militaries and the youth cohorts of the two countries.

Most of these encounters, barring a few notable exceptions, have largely been ridden more by polemics underlying typical Indian and Pakistani nationalism and by partisan descriptions rather than being the product of a systematic analysis of the possible causes behind the incident, the cycle of reactions that it produced and the ensuing, very dangerous, security implications. Resultantly, the broader, quite complex, and multi-tier national and geopolitical landscape within which Pulwama ought to have been viewed, has been obscured.

This commentary raises, and then attempts to respond to, a few fundamental questions to make sense of the incident. It invites a broader reflection by academic and policy stakeholders to understand: (i) why Pulwama occurred, what were its underlying dynamics and, importantly, does the attack represent a turning point regarding Kashmir; (ii) what intended or unintended effects it generated; and (iii) what policy implications it sets for India and Pakistan, and the broader international community.

The Context

The rapidly evolving geopolitical conditions, and the manifold layers of national and international politics surrounding the uprising in Kashmir, dictate that the backdrop to the Pulwama attack is different from similar perpetrations in the past. That uniqueness also influences its serious consequences for regional peace and stability.

In its immediate context, Kashmir has been called, e.g., by Arundhati Roy, a celebrated Indian writer, a 'real theatre of unspeakable violence and moral corrosion.' A similar assertion is put forth by Yashwant Sinha, the former Indian minister for Foreign Affairs from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He observed that a 'doctrine of the state', or what is commonly referred to as the Doval doctrine, is being played out in Kashmir to quell the armed rebellion through the brutal use of military force. It is common knowledge that IHK is the most densely militarized zone in the world, and that the incumbent government in India nurtures a revisionist Hindutva agenda, both of which reinforce the perspectives by Roy and Sinha and the one of many other members of the moderate segment of civil society in India. The fact that in the wake of Pulwama, a number of Kashmiri workers and students were subjected to torture by enraged Hindutva vigilantes throughout India and that the BJP leadership tacitly encouraged the pogrom, reflects seeping of a renewed hatred against the Kashmiris or, for that matter, Indian Muslims in general.

While suspicion of Kashmiris as 'disloyal' citizens is a ubiquitous sentiment since the partition of British India in 1947, the last five years in particular have witnessed Kashmiris being reframed as 'terrorists' – a term used for both rebel combatants as well as common stone throwers comprising school and college youth. Sharply opposed to it, in Pakistan, the label used for Kashmiri fighters and for those who have been employed as proxies to support the struggle, is freedom fighters or mujahideen; indigenous Kashmiris also use these latter labels for those killed by Indian security forces. Perhaps apart from the Israel-Palestine conflict, South Asia is another and more lurid site of a contentious construction of terrorism. It was unsurprising therefore, that Pulwama was consistently classified as a terrorist act in India, and starkly different in Pakistan where it was more often termed an act of violence.

In geopolitical terms, Kashmir conspicuously staggers in the intense competition between China and India for the domination of vital lines of communication around the Indian Ocean. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is part of China's strategic Road and Belt initiative, not only emanates from a disputed territory, i.e., Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region adjoining China's *Xinjiang* Autonomous Region, but the CPEC runs perilously close to the IHK. This conceivably creates alarms among Indian decision-makers and strategists of a potential encirclement, in combination with a similar string of Chinese bridgeheads (through sea ports etc.) in India's northern-eastern neighbourhood.

Pakistan's Balochistan province is the territorial terminal of CPEC at Gwadar Port, which is situated in proximity to its assumed competitor, the Indian developed Iranian seaport of Chabahar in the Persian Gulf. CPEC as well as Balochistan therefore stand out in India's wider security and economic calculation and appreciably parcel into the evolved power struggle between the two powers. Notwithstanding apprehension among Baloch nationalists about China's strategic involvement as a measure of military expansionism, and efforts to obtain further control of local resources by the Pakistani central government, the existence of the mega project in Balochistan foreshadowed from the outset the possibility of a likely clash of Indo-Sino interests in South Asia, as well as greater incentives for terrorism in Pakistan.

To be clear, the Indian geo-strategic alignment with the United States is no secret; the Americans have been propping up India as a counter weight to China since at least the 1970s. However, China's global Road and Belt initiative, and especially its expanding role in the heartland of Asia where India occupies a focal position as a bulwark against the Communist regime, has radically disturbed the existing geo-political equilibrium. Pakistan which is one overt geo-strategic and geo-economic face of resurgent China and wields considerable influence over the Afghan Taliban and Kashmiri groups, is not a very likeable actor for either India or the US.

The 13 February 2019 attack on Iranian Revolutionary Guards (a day before the Pulwama incident occurred) by

Jaish al-Adl, a militant group based in the Pak-Iran border region of Balochistan, which the Iranian government alleged was carried out at the behest of the US and Israel, further highlights intricacies involved in regional politics.

In sum, indeed we can look at Pulwama simply according to existing orthodoxy i.e., Pakistan's historical effort to seize Kashmir by means of a sub-conventional apparatus. Nevertheless, studying the Pulwama incident in context and more thoroughly is likely to lead to a better informed assessment. It essentially implies that a terrorism framework alone cannot provide a comprehensive analytical lens to grasp the complexity underlying the situation.

The Possibilities and Effects of Pulwama

Rather, given the above backdrop, a number of scenarios can be conceived that may have inspired the perpetration of the Pulwama attack. Notably, depending upon the analytical pair of lenses that we may wear to view the Kashmir conflict, each contextualized scenario can be reckoned to have produced its own set or series of effects in terms of actions, claims, narratives, discourses, counter actions and counter claims and related implications. Six possible perspectives are outlined below.

(i) Tyrannicide

As a consequence of the perpetual state of oppression and repression, the situation inside Kashmir prior to Pulwama could be reckoned somewhere between a rebellion and revolt, a mix of open defiance of the order and an armed resistance that has become gradually more offensive, to push out the Indian occupation forces. Within this scenario, Pulwama can be seen as a reaction, an expression of disaffection or alienation and anger, or an act of revenge, serving to forge solidarity with or among the broader Kashmiri freedom collectivity. The attack seems to have generated both positive and negative effects: a visibly newfound impetus infused in the Kashmir liberation movement, a clear shift from rebellion to revolt. On the other hand, it simultaneously provoked a further clampdown on civil liberties through a wave of arrests, torture, forced disappearances, and the banning of pro-independence political parties.

(ii) Covert Warfare

A second perspective views the Pulwama incident as yet another manifestation of covert warfare. Both India and Pakistan have been engaged in a drawn-out covert warfare played out not only in IHK but also in Afghanistan and in Pakistan itself. Viewed through this lens, the Pulwama attack can be seen as a response to a few recent provocations from the Indian side through its proxies, for example: the assassination of the pro-Pakistan Baloch leader, Siraj Raisani, by a suicide bomber in July 2018 which killed 147 people; the attack on the Chinese Consulate in Karachi in November 2018 by Baloch rebels; as well as a number of suicide attacks in January 2019 in the Loralai District of Balochistan province on a military garrison and a police gathering.

A suicide attack in Kandahar, Afghanistan in late December 2018 that killed the mastermind of the attack on the Chinese consulate was perhaps, conjecturally speaking, the first episode of a Pakistani sponsored retaliation, and Pulwama, the second, consequent to attacks in Loralai. Overall, from this perspective, the spate of violence can be characterized as part of a convoluted cycle of provocation, retaliation and revenge. It is not inconceivable that the Pulwama attack had a tacit Chinese nod due to India's support of Baloch militants against CPEC infrastructures and against the Chinese consulate. If one views this to be a credible scenario, Pulwama was not simply a retaliatory act but also meant to be a symbolic act of communication involving deterrence by punishment.

(iii) Proxy Warfare

According to this perspective, the Pulwama attack was orchestrated by Pakistan's 'Deep State' to avenge atrocities against Kashmiris and inspire freedom fighters. and perhaps also as a way to internationalize the Kashmir issue. Such an assumption is in accord with past precedents, therefore the Indian government,

its allies as well as major Western countries seem powerfully influenced by it. Indeed, Pulwama must have assured many Kashmiris about Pakistan's resolve for sustained support. However, it drew condemnation from members of the United Nations Security Council. Specifically, India and some of the Western states (especially the US) were even more unequivocal in their commitment to support India. They made it abundantly clear that armed liberation struggles in the post 9/11 environment are no longer acceptable, and hence plausibly legitimized India's right of self-defence. Aside from the ill-treatment of many Kashmiris in India (not to speak of accounts of torture-induced death of Pakistani prisoners in Indian jails), not only was Pakistan stripped of its most favoured nation status by India, a ban was also slapped on Pakistani film artists and their products. Curiously, Iran also joined with India in announcing reprisals against *Jaish al-Adl* in Pakistan. There was also political division in Pakistan itself about the utility of pro-Kashmir banned militant organizations and there was renewed discussion about the need for concerted action against a broader circle of militants in the country.

The Balakot air strike by India on 26 February 2019 unleashed another set of dynamics, resulting in a counter strike by the Pakistani air force and the downing of two Indian fighter planes. In addition, several casualties were inflicted on Indian ground forces along the Line of Control by a nibbling ground riposte. While Balakot initially brought cheers from many Indians and dismayed common Pakistanis, the air and ground response reversed the emotional reaction. The unraveling of intelligence about a possible missile attack by India to avenge the shooting down of its aircraft and the resultant readiness by Pakistan for retaliation, conveyed through international channels to India, later brought the two countries to the brink of war. Intriguingly in the process, the Kashmir problem was internationalized. In essence, historical anti-Pakistan feeling on the one hand, and consistent moral and material backing of the Kashmiris' rights of self-determination by Pakistan and distrust of the Kashmiris as pro-Pakistani by the Indians on the other hand, played a measurable role in giving credence to the perception for a proxy war narrative.

(iv) India's Pre-Election Subterfuge

Indian analysts as well as Pakistani foreign office spokesmen had warned about the probability of a momentous diversionary incident by the BJP government prior to Indian elections, to cover up governance failures, to neutralize political opponents, and to rally Hindu voters behind it. In this context, the Pulwama attack was seen by some Indian political dissidents as a false flag operation, orchestrated by the Hindu extremist group RSS. In the wake of the Pulwama and Balokot attacks, it looked, at least for a while, that the BJP government achieved its aim of patriotic mobilization. The BJP gained political mileage and successfully diverted attention away from other pressing problems of governance. At the end, participants in the Indian election campaign were discernibly divided over whether or not a war narrative, or a religiously sanctioned hysteria produced by politically motivated violence, should be employed as part of electoral canvassing.

(v) Spoiler's Bid

In late 2018, Pakistani authorities announced the opening of the Gurudwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur, a sacred site for Sikhs, for the first time since 1947. This was meant to facilitate the commemoration of the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the spiritual founder of the Sikh religion. The Sikh community was exhilarated by this Pakistani initiative to open the border for its members without visa requirements and the corresponding positive response from the Indian government to partake in it. This created a win-win sentiment on both sides. An India-Pakistan normalization, however symbolic, was desired and hailed by the international community. But then the Pulwama attack occurred. The setback to the evolving peace environment was its major achievement. Extremist forces in India were emboldened to take a tougher stand against Pakistan. It suddenly raised the specter of a strategic war between nuclear-armed neighbours with global ramifications and the prospect of imminent chaos and anarchy in the region. There are many beneficiaries for such a scenario in both India and Pakistan. Consequently, the possibility of the Pulwama attack being a bid to spoil bilateral peace cannot be altogether ignored. Who could have been behind it? Among other hardline nationalists and rogue elements in India and Pakistan, Pakistani jihadi renegades could have been responsible. Alternatively, elements from Daesh (IS), which has obtained a certain foothold in IJK, could be behind the attack.

(vi) International Conspiratorial Project

A close examination of the Pulwama attack reveals that it clearly produced a threefold effect, provocation, alienation, and mobilization. This is a time-tested tactic, typically employed by terrorist organizations. The Indian government and sections of the public were provoked as witnessed in the overreaction in the form of crackdowns by the security forces in Kashmir, the widespread violence and vilification of Kashmiris in mainland India, and the restrictions imposed on their movement. The range of arbitrary persecutions and victimizations further alienated Kashmiris, thereby harnessing more sympathizers for the separatists or other conspiratorial groupings and evoking mobilization for further escalation or at least for sustaining the current level of militancy. Likewise, India's cross-border military aggression into Pakistan provoked the political leadership in Islamabad to respond while the Pakistani population was mobilized for demonstrating more solidarity with the Kashmiri freedom struggle. In this context, it should be remembered that an Indo-Pakistan war was once conceived by Osama Bin Laden as beneficial to al-Qaeda's cause since it would mean a weakening of the conventional potential of the two countries through mutual destruction. In turn, this might have facilitated an Islamic reign project by al-Qaeda after defeating the residual forces through armed jihad. Even though this may be a far-fetched scenario, it cannot be discounted out of hand.

Conclusion and Broad Implications

The foremost inference that can be drawn from the aforementioned discussion is that the Pulwama incident can be approached from a variety of analytical angles, each with a distinct set of implications. Out of the six hypothetical scenarios discussed here, it arguably emerges that not only was Pulwama avoidable, but its subsequent effects would have been more manageable if the concerned states - especially India - had acted with care, prudence, and astute statecraft. Ironically, the kind of reactions that the attack generated, primarily in India, demonstrate a widespread absence of critical, fair-minded, and holistic analysis. Rather, most local and international reactions straightway construed the act as 'terrorist'.

Besides, what Pulwama has unambiguously changed - and what is more worrisome - is that not only the cost of covert warfare has upended the previously acceptable threshold of pain. Most significantly, the past connotation of Kashmir being a dangerous flashpoint has undergone a salient inflection warranting a major policy revision in the strategic calculus of the two countries. Previously, the notion of Kashmir being a 'flashpoint' implied that any untoward occurrence in this Himalayan region, or elsewhere in India, could spiral into conventional war. That is no longer relevant. Instead, the recent states' behaviour has shown that India and Pakistan disregard deterrence, and that they are willing to at once move to a strategic level of warfare. Consequently, any military exchanges incited by Pulwama-like episodes in the future, are understood to inhere the dangerous potential to instantly engulf the region into a mutually destructive nuclear conflict.

On the other hand, insinuations in the majority of the hypothesized scenarios sketched above point out that there is scope for increased interstate cooperation as well as for a helpful role by members of the international community. This could contribute to a meaningful arrest of political violence as well as control of the renegades and other clandestine international non-state actors operating in South Asia. Specifically, expert and material assistance to Pakistan for demobilization of the personnel of banned militant organizations could improve prospects for a broader peace in South Asia.

All in all, the analysis emphasizes that a solution to the Kashmir problem can and should be explored through constructive rather than impulsive actions. For this purpose, multiple mechanisms already exist. What can pave the way for such a constructive engagement is that both countries need to agree mutually or through international mediation on a common and binding definition and prohibition of terrorism, which in and of itself, would be a breakthrough for a forward looking dialogue to resolve conflicts, including the one around Kashmir.

About the Author: Muhammad Feyyaz is currently a doctoral candidate at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University, Belfast, UK.