Seeing Political Violence through Different Lenses

by Gregory D. Miller

Abstract

This Editorial Postscript was a late addition to this issue of Perspectives on Terrorism*, but it felt necessary to contribute something to the Special Correspondence. There is value in the essays by Muhammad Feyyaz and Abhinav Pandya[1], even taken separately, but greater significance comes from discussing where the authors agree and where they disagree, both about Pulwama and about its consequences. Below is an attempt to connect the two pieces, to help generate broader discussions over the challenges of studying and writing about political violence.*

Keywords: Kashmir, India, Pakistan, Pulwama, political violence

Introduction

"One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter". This commonly used phrase is problematic because there are real differences between an act of terrorism and an act of guerrilla warfare, having to do with the victims, nature, and purpose of the attack. Distinctions can blur when guerrillas attack civilians, or when terrorist groups attack military targets. However, the phrase illustrates how one's background, experience, and personal biases color perceptions of an event as being terrorism or some other form of political violence.

The two pieces in this issue's Special Correspondence illustrate both the value and the challenge of scholars being influenced by their perspectives. Both authors have their own biases[2] and discussing these different perspectives is critical for understanding conflicts in general, and especially those that involve terrorism. Particularly instructive are the differences and the similarities evident in the two pieces. Below I discuss some of these, and then provide a bit of my own perspective. My hope is to help bridge the gap between perspectives, and to highlight the continued challenges, not just for resolving the conflict in Kashmir, but also for understanding political violence more broadly.

Article Purpose

While both pieces discuss the same event, the authors have different goals. Pandya focuses on India's evolving security policy as a result of the incident, and Feyyaz focuses more on Pulwama itself, examining various narratives that exist or that may arise, regarding the causes and consequences of the violence. This difference affects how each author approaches the problem as well as their conclusions, and highlights how different purposes influence an author's writing.

The author's keywords hint at these different purposes. Both authors use the same first four keywords, and in the same order: Kashmir, India, Pakistan, Pulwama. The difference is in the fifth keyword. Feyyaz uses "nuclear war", emphasizing the potentially catastrophic consequences of the event. In contrast, Pandya's fifth keyword is Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM), the group that claimed responsibility for Pulwama, suggesting a focus on the perpetrators of the event.

Language

One of the challenges in writing about political violence is terminology. We see this both in academic writing and in the media. It relates to the problem of defining terrorism, especially since there is no agreed-upon definition of terrorism. It is also a function of every individual's background, experience, and bias.

A difference in terminology is how each author refers to the location of the attack. Both use Kashmir as a keyword, but in the essays Feyyaz refers to "Indian Held Kashmir (IHK)" while Pandya refers to "Jammu and Kashmir (India)". This subtle difference creates an important distinction between the authors' views of the problem. Feyyaz's use of IHK, consistent with Pakistan's official term for the area, suggests that India's involvement in Kashmir is part of the problem. Pandya's use of the territory name, Jammu and Kashmir, suggests that India's involvement is legitimate and justified.

Use of the word terrorism is especially problematic. This is partly due to misappropriation of the term by politicians and pundits, often used to refer to any activity with which they disagree. Even academics have a difficult time using the term in a consistent and unbiased way. The two essays highlight this problematic label. Pandya uses the words terror, terrorist, or terrorism 18 times, and refers to Pulwama as an "attack". Feyyaz uses the terror words nine times, three of which are in quotes indicating India's perspective of the incident. Also, rather than label Pulwama an attack, Feyyaz refers to it as "an act of violence" and an "incident". Perhaps I am reading too much into word choice, but terminology can illuminate an author's perspective about an idea or event, especially when chosen subconsciously.

The Event

Building on language, the authors refer to the victims of the attack in different terms. Feyyaz refers to the victims as "Indian security forces", making no distinction between military or police personnel. Pandya refers to the victims as "Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)". Although CRPF is a paramilitary force that often engages in counterinsurgency operations, using the official name could give the impression that the victims were law enforcement personnel.

The authors also disagree on what Pulwama means. While both claim it is unique in how it escalated tensions between the two states, Pandya suggests it is an unprecedented and shocking event, which explains India's strong reaction. Feyyaz sees it as merely "a continuation of an on-going campaign", representing a tipping point rather than a shock, which would lead to confusion over India's apparent overreaction.

Pandya refers to the dangerous evolution of the conflict, in which a local Kashmiri boy was radicalized to carry out the attack, firmly planting the blame for the attack on radical Islam. He sees this as indicating future danger in Kashmir, while dismissing the likelihood of Muslim radicalization within India. In contrast, Feyyaz sees the radicalization of youth as a function of the continued conflict between India and Pakistan, especially India's approach towards Muslims, and expects the radicalization of Muslims in the region to continue.

Security Consequences

Several areas of agreement relate to the effects of further violence on relations between India and Pakistan. Both authors agree that India's domestic politics played a role in its response, and both are critical of India in this respect. Pandya puts much of the blame on Prime Minister Modi, whose election platform called for a tougher stance towards Pakistan. Feyyaz agrees that politics played a role in India's reaction, but sees it as a more systemic problem in India and thus likely to continue long after Modi is out of office.

Both also agree that future conflict over Kashmir risks escalation to war, even a nuclear exchange, and that Pulwama changed the security calculus of both states. They appear to agree that these events weakened deterrence between the two states, although Feyyaz sees it as a mutual weakening, while Pandya suggests it is mainly Pakistan's deterrence that is weakened. This dangerous situation, where one state believes deterrence is still effective while its adversary sees it as weak, can lead to conflict.

Regional and International Consequences

The two essays agree about growing international concern over conflict between India and Pakistan. Pandya calls it "a game-changing event in South Asia" while Feyyaz refers to its "serious consequences for regional peace and stability." Both scholars discuss Sino-Indian tensions, and China's inclination towards supporting Pakistan, which effects India's security and its prosperity. Likewise, both discuss close U.S. ties to India, at least partly as a balance against growing Chinese power and influence.

There is obviously fear of a Kashmir conflict dragging Great Powers into a war in South Asia. Though from an outsider's perspective, I am not entirely convinced that either China or the U.S would be reliable allies in a ground war, especially with the risk of a nuclear exchange. This potentially creates another dangerous situation, where one state believes its allies will support it in war but that its rival's allies are unreliable, that can lead to conflict.

Another Perspective

I would be remiss if I do not take the opportunity to offer a third perspective on Pulwama, from the point-of-view of someone outside the region. In terms of broader implications, I defer to the authors who know significantly more about their country and the region, so I will focus on Pulwama. This event displays many of the indicators of an act of terrorism, yet one could make several arguments for labeling it some other form of political violence.

JeM wants Kashmir to become part of Pakistan and wants Pakistan governed by an extreme interpretation of Sharia law. JeM is on several state lists of terrorist organizations and has carried out attacks against civilians since it split from Harkat-ul-Mujahideen in 2000. The U.S. designated JeM a Foreign Terrorist Organization in December 2001 after an attack on India's Parliament (India and the United Nations Security Council also designated JeM a terrorist organization in 2001). Pakistan banned the group and froze its assets in 2002 and those of its splinter groups in 2003, but India still blames Pakistan for at minimum providing a safe haven for JeM's leadership, if not giving outright support to the group. Pandya references this state sponsorship several times, while Feyyaz focuses on Pakistan's efforts to weaken groups like JeM.

Many view attacks against military targets as guerrilla warfare rather than terrorism, and a high percentage of JeM's attacks are against the military. According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), of the 77 terrorist attacks carried out by JeM through 2017, 56 targeted the military or the police, or both. The other 21 were against "soft" targets, like private citizens, business, etc.[3] Despite this high percentage of military targets, one could argue the victims are often non-combatants at the time of the attack; the victims of Pulwama were in buses, with no reasonable expectation of combat. However, given the contentious nature of the territory (both authors refer to it as the world's most militarized zone), the U.S. Department of State's definition of terrorism suggests the attack would be something other than terrorism.[4]

Of the 77 JeM attacks in GTD, 21 were suicide bombings. The suicide bombing tactic used at Pulwama might suggest an act of terrorism, but we would need to know more about the group and the individual responsible. Suicide bombing can be a sign of determination or an act of desperation. It is still a popular tactic for drawing attention to a cause, because it is shocking to the public. It is also incredibly effective to diminish the military capabilities of a larger force.

The perpetrator's motivation is also a factor, but one that is frequently overlooked before labels are attached to an attack. If this was an individual's act of revenge against India's security forces,[5] then that places it more on the side of terrorism. If the individual and group saw it as an opportunity to weaken India's military capabilities in the area, then that is more akin to guerrilla warfare. There may be other goals, and until we know the intent, any label is premature.

Conclusion

Like many acts of political violence, Pulwama will be viewed differently depending on a number of factors, including one's own biases, whether or not one views the JeM cause as legitimate, and one's willingness to tolerate the use of violence to achieve political goals. In any case, more discussions that incorporate multiple perspectives are important for developing a better understanding of political violence, and reducing both its frequency and severity.

The two essays in this issue's Special Correspondence are interesting and informative on their own. Drawing connections between the two creates a greater understanding both of the event in question and its aftermath, but also hopefully enhances our appreciation for the link between personal biases and our understanding of terrorism, as one form of political violence. I thank the authors, Muhammad Feyyaz and Abhinav Pandya, for contributing to this dialogue, and I hope it will continue.

Note: The views expressed in this essay are the author's alone and do not reflect the position or policy of the Air University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

About the Author: **Gregory D. Miller** *is Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at the U.S. Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), Montgomery, AL. Before joining ACSC he was Chair of the Strategy Department and taught the Terrorism Elective at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School, in Norfolk, VA. He holds a doctorate in Political Science from The Ohio State University and is one of the Associate Editors of Perspectives on Terrorism.*

Notes

[1] Muhammad Feyyaz, "Contextualizing the Pulwama Attack in Kashmir – A Perspective from Pakistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no.2 (April 2019); Abhinav Pandya, "The Future of Indo-Pak Relations after the Pulwama Attack," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no.2 (April 2019).

[2] I use the term bias in a purely academic sense, not as a criticism of the authors. Both essays are informative and I hope both authors view this postscript as part of an academic dialogue rather than as a criticism.

[3] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2018). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd. JeM may be responsible for other attacks that are not catalogued in GTD, if those attacks do not fit the database definition of terrorism, such as they were directed against combatants. GTD also relies heavily on Western media reports for its data, so it is possible some JeM attacks are not included in the database even if they fit the definition of terrorism.

[4] The U.S. Department of State defines terrorism as, "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." It then defines non-combatants as civilians and "military personnel (whether or not armed or on duty) who are not deployed in a war zone or a war-like setting." U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017* (September 2018), 339, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2017/index.htm.

[5] According to the perpetrator's family, he radicalized after being beaten by Indian security forces. Fayaz Bukhari "Kashmir Suicide Bomber Radicalized after Beating by Troops, Parents Say," *Reuters.com* (15 February 2019), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-bomber/kashmir-suicide-bomber-radicalized-after-beating-by-troops-parents-say-idUSKCN1Q41LK.