

Special Correspondence

The Future of Indo-Pak Relations after the Pulwama Attack

by Abhinav Pandya

Abstract

The post-Pulwama Indo-Pak stand-off marks a strategic change - a much more assertive Indian state in response to the terrorist activities of Pakistan-sponsored non-state actors. It demonstrates India's firm determination to root out terrorism even if that requires smart cross-border operations, violating the sovereign space of Pakistan, and risking a full-fledged war. Also, with the global attention that the recent stand-off received, it is highly likely that the Kashmir issue, which has somehow remained a local problem, will not be so anymore. Any Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir is likely, in the future, to have strong international ramifications.

Keywords: Kashmir, India, Pakistan, Pulwama attack, Jaish-e-Mohammed

Introduction

On 14 February 2019, a vehicle-borne suicide bomber attacked a convoy of buses carrying Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) security personnel on the Srinagar-Jammu national highway at Lethpora (Pulwama district), in the militancy-ridden state of Jammu and Kashmir (India). The Fidayeen attack led to the deaths of 40 CRPF personnel and the attacker. The Pakistan-based Islamist militant group *Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)* claimed responsibility for the attack. In informal murmurings in Indian security circles, this Fidayeen attack has been branded as “na bhuto, na bhavishyati” (something that is unprecedented and is not likely to repeat itself ever).

The immediate fallout of the attack led to a flare-up between India and Pakistan and both countries, in a span of few days, were almost on the verge of a full-fledged conventional war, after the Indian air strikes on the *JeM* training camp of Balakot (Pakistan). Some strategic experts even feared the most dreadful scenario of an escalation to a nuclear exchange. Eventually, an unexpected chain of events that included the downing of a Pakistani F-16, the unconditional release of an Indian pilot by Pakistan, and the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's emotional peace overture prevented the escalation and brought a quick-fix peace in the world's most militarized flashpoint. However, things are still not entirely smooth between India and Pakistan. With India's Prime Minister Modi making loud proclamations of retaliatory strikes, and with intense cross-border firing going on, fears of either a deliberate or an accidental escalation still loom on the horizon.

The recent flare-up between India and Pakistan looks like a game-changing event in South Asia. The geopolitics of South Asia has changed in real terms. Gone are the days of status quo and classic strategic restraint, exercised by India. The uniqueness of the current face-off needs to be analyzed to forecast some future geopolitical contours of South Asia.

Let us begin with the incident itself. The most disturbing feature of the Fidayeen attack is that a local Kashmiri boy was indoctrinated to volunteer as a suicide bomber. The local version of Islam in Kashmir is very liberal, and local youth are unlikely to volunteer for ISIS-like suicide bombings. It demonstrates that the Kashmiri militant movement has drifted far away from a separatist political campaign and is currently entangled in the grips of Islamist jihadi extremism. That said, it clearly emerges that apart from the role of foreign proxies there has also been a significant issue with India's handling of the Kashmir issue. The very fact that Islamist and jihadi organizations like *Jamaat-i-Islami* have managed to entrench themselves so deeply speaks volumes about where India failed in reigning in the growth of extremist organizations and in addressing the alienation of local people. India never had a clear and well-thought-out policy for Kashmir. The state of Jammu and Kashmir was always a laboratory for miscalculated experiments launched by bureaucrats, directionless spooks

and an incredibly selfish and incompetent political leadership. Such short-term and foolhardy experiments resulted in high levels of alienation, a trust deficit, and growing jihadi radicalization in a state that was once famous for its superb cultural refinements and its spiritual and intellectual pursuits. In the future, if local youth joining suicide squads indeed becomes a trend - which looks quite likely with the present levels of alienation, radicalization, and Delhi's security-centric approach - then India has a lot to worry about. Also, this opens the way for the entry of transnational terrorist organizations, like al-Qa'ida or the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, Afghanistan (ISKP), [] into Kashmir and possibly also the rest of India, where so far the local Muslim populace more or less stayed away from terrorist organizations.

In the past, India faced the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which immediately received global attention because of the death of several foreigners and the barbaric nature of the killing of civilians in the attack. However, the Indian response, once again, was one of strategic restraint, fearing that in the event of escalation or even a limited retaliation, Pakistan would respond with a nuclear strike. However, in the post-Pulwama flare-up, India could not be expected to display a weak-kneed gesture as PM Modi's central election plank was a tough and powerful approach in defense policy vis-à-vis both Pakistan and China. There was huge resentment and anger among Indian voters over the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) timid response to Pakistan-based incessant terrorist intrusions into Kashmir and the mainland. They voted Modi into power with huge expectations of a more assertive gesture against Pakistan and China. Modi's hard-nosed approach and zero-tolerance for terrorism was already evident after his surgical strikes against Pakistan, in response to the Fidayeen attack at Uri brigade headquarters by the *JeM* in 2016. Post Uri, sane strategic minds had a strong inkling that in the event of any such future transgression from Pakistan, Modi's India may go for a massive retaliatory action, which may range from limited missile strikes on terrorist camps to full-scale war.

With the post-Pulwama standoff between India and Pakistan, India has finally called off Pakistan's nuclear bluff. Now it is evident in no uncertain terms that if Pakistan continues to harbor terrorist groups against India as its strategic assets, there will be no space for military restraint by India in any future attack, as long as Modi is in power. There appears no guarantee that Pakistan will bring significant changes to its behavior. However, the Indian threshold on the question of cross-border terrorism has undoubtedly hit rock bottom. Any misadventure from the Pakistani side is most likely to result in gruesome retaliation, indeed, with a likelihood of escalating into a nuclear face-off. Also, Indian strikes in Balakot, which is in mainland Pakistan, not in the disputed PoK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) area, speak volumes of India's capabilities to strike deep into the mainland, displaying an assertive force-posture. Besides, Modi's India is firmly under the influence of Hindu nationalism. With 24/7 news channels raising war hysteria, and ordinary people enthused with a rejuvenated pride in Hindu nationalism, even if the center-left and the milder Congress party come to power, the Indian government can hardly go back to the old policy of strategic restraint against Pakistan, without risking major electoral defeat.

Although Pakistan kept India on tenterhooks for almost two decades by playing its nuclear card, the recent surgical strikes and the previous Balakot strikes not only enabled India to call off Pakistan's nuclear bluff but also exposed the loopholes in Pakistan's nuclear card. India has made it categorically clear that even in the event of a limited attack by tactical nuclear weapons, India will respond with massive retaliation. Further, there is also a strong possibility of India reviewing its nuclear doctrine and altering its no first use stance. Pakistan realizes that even if it uses nukes against India, then in any retaliatory strike Pakistan would be annihilated, as admitted recently by none other than Parvez Musharraf, the former President of Pakistan. Short of nuclear war, in any conventional war, India has a clear advantage, and India's armed forces realize that.

Moreover, as seen in the recent standoff, Pakistan will not be able to sustain a long-drawn war effort due to its miserable economic condition. Furthermore, on account of its global diplomatic clout and much greater financial strength, India is likely to use its diplomatic heft in isolating Pakistan, pursuing multilateral institutions to impose sanctions against Pakistan, and declare it a terror-sponsoring state, though not quite successfully so, as became evident in the last five years. Not surprisingly, in the recent standoff, Pakistan's all-weather friends like Saudi Arabia and China were hesitant to lend open support in any war effort against India. Saudi Prince Muhammad Bin Salman visited India after his visit to Pakistan and was seen exchanging warm

hugs with Modi. India's deft diplomatic encirclement of Pakistan was also visible when the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), of which Pakistan is a founding member, invited India as its guest of honour this year - despite Pakistan's opposition. Furthermore, the OIC did not include any reference to Kashmir in its final Abu Dhabi declaration (2019), and the UN Security Council condemned the Pulwama attack and named *Jaish* as the culprit. Even China could not prevent that.

Internationalization of the Issue

In spite of the UN-mandated plebiscite for Kashmir, four wars with Pakistan, and Pakistan's repeated efforts to internationalize the issue, India has in the past managed to prevent internationalization and remained steadfast in insisting on the conflict's bilateral nature. However, with the nuclearization of South Asia, the internationalization of the regional Indo-Pak conflict was long overdue. With the post-Pulwama standoff and the global attention it received - including the high-profile formal and backchannel diplomatic activity involving global powers - there is hardly any doubt that any future Indo-Pak confrontation will have strong international ramifications. In the United States' strategic calculus, India can serve as a great bulwark against China. With US-Pakistan frictions sharpening over Pakistan's non-compliance on actions against the *Haqqani* network, and China's stakes increasing in Pakistan with its \$62 billion investment in CPEC with the broader objective of achieving superpower status, the fault lines are becoming more explicit in South Asia. China has, in fact emerged as a vocal advocate of the proscribed *JeM* and its chief Masood Azhar. However, bilateral bonhomie is still a dominant factor in Asian and West Asian geo-politics, giving much strength to smokescreens and grey zones. The US still needs Pakistan for a dignified withdrawal from Afghanistan. India, as witnessed in its traditional inward-looking approach and its obsession with protecting its strategic autonomy, is not yet fully committed to volunteering itself as an American foot soldier against China. India and China have always surprised the world by resolving their so-called "alarming" and "threatening" disputes in a very mystic and oriental style of diplomacy, which has remained quite elusive to the Western intellect. Also, China, much to the chagrin of Pakistan, has never lent full-fledged support to Pakistan, whenever the need arose - be it in the Kargil crisis or the post-Pulwama standoff.

Moreover, Pakistan has openly aligned with Sunni Muslim powers by joining the Saudi-led Islamic Counter-Terrorism Military Coalition. Also, Pakistan's support to terrorist groups in Iran and the treatment of Shias in Pakistan have always been an irritant between Iran and Pakistan. India might leverage its goodwill with Afghanistan, another victim of Pakistan's proxy groups, and Iran. India already enjoys a strategic footprint in Iran and Afghanistan. With the current Modi-led regime being Hindu-nationalist, a question that often comes up in diplomatic circles is, will the India-Pakistan conflict increasingly take on the character of a conflict between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world?

In the view of this writer, it appears highly unlikely for several reasons. First and foremost, India has not projected itself against the Muslim world. Instead, India has consistently maintained that its fight is against terrorism, making it unequivocally clear that it is not against any particular religious community. India has the world's second-largest Muslim population, which has so far stayed away from global Islamism on account of its robust syncretic roots with non-Muslims in India. Hence, India cannot afford to project it as a fight between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world. Such a projection would have disastrous consequences for the country's internal peace and for communal harmony in India. Also, in spite of the BJP being avowedly Hindu-nationalist, one hardly comes across major digressions from the founding principle of secularism in India's foreign policy.

On the contrary, PM Modi has cultivated strong personal and official relations with the Muslim

World and its leaders. Saudi Arabia even awarded PM Modi with its highest civilian award. India has earned the goodwill of Muslims in Afghanistan. Not only this, India continues to enjoy a friendly and warm relationship with interests that are at odds with each other - such as Israel and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Palestine and Israel, and Russia and the United States. It appears quite puzzling as to how India can negotiate a space between

mutually conflicting nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran. The fact is that India has negotiated that space quite smoothly over the last several decades. India prefers to stay away from, global military alliance systems, and will continue to do so. India's approach is defensive with a strong focus on securing its immediate frontiers. Hence, India has nurtured strong bilateral relationships, staying away from military interventions in foreign countries (exceptions being the secession of Bangladesh in the 1970s and the failed peace-making attempt Sri Lanka in the 1980s), and remained reasonably transparent in its objectives and intentions vis-à-vis foreign powers. Such an approach has enabled it to project an image of objective neutrality and strike a classic "strategic balance."

Having addressed diverse issues related to long-range geo-political ramifications of the post-Pulwama flare-up, it looks as if the incident has indeed been a game-changer in South Asia. India's response demonstrates a strategic breakthrough - a much more assertive Indian state in response to the terrorist activities of Pakistan-sponsored, or at least -tolerated, non-state actors. It not only confirms and shows India's zero-tolerance to terrorism and a firm determination to root out terrorism from its soil, but also the intent to take smart cross-border operations if the need arises. However, India's assertion was measured and dignified. The official statement of India's Ministry of External Affairs categorically stated that the air-strikes were not against any nation, but against terror. India did not attack its neighbor's military installations whereas Pakistan did so. There can be little doubt that the Balakot airstrikes signal the advent of India as a more active – but still restrained - military actor in world affairs.

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