



Is Pakistan Re-positioning itself in Kashmir? Islamabad's Five Likely Strategies

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There is a renewed Pakistani interest in the Kashmir issue today, after a lull during 2007-09. There have been a series of activities, including rallies, meetings, statements etc, signifying a shift in Pakistan's approach, in terms of re-igniting the Kashmir debate within its body politic. From an Indian perspective, it is essential to find out and confirm whether there is a new trend inside Pakistan vis-à-vis J&K. More importantly, it is also imperative to trace the path that Pakistan is likely to pursue in terms of exploiting the existing situation in Kashmir valley.

I FROM J&K ELECTIONS IN 2008 TO THE KASHMIR UNREST IN 2010 KASHMIR BACK IN PAKISTAN'S AGENDA?

Towards the end of 2008, Pakistan's interest and influence reached the lowest in J&K. Four significant reasons could be identified for this; first, was the Musharraf factor. Without a doubt, President Pervez Musharraf pursued a positive approach towards since the beginning of the Indo-Pak peace process in 2004. There was a sudden decline in terrorist related violence in J&K. More importantly, Musharraf also advised the Hurriyat leadership to take into account the changed regional environment (meaning the Indo-Pak peace process) and devise a strategy accordingly. Initial remarks by now President Asif Ali Zardari, were also along the same lines, when he mentioned that the Kashmir dispute should put on the back burner. The Hurriyat at this point was crestfallen and was thoroughly disappointed with Pakistan and its leadership.

Second, during 2006-08, Pakistan itself was witnessing continuous turmoil within. In fact, it was like Pakistan was at war with itself. A series of events made Pakistan to look inwards.

Third, the unfortunate, but lethal terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008 not only reversed the Indo-Pak peace process, but resulted in enormous international pressure on Pakistan. As a result, there was an unofficial control over the activities of the

Lashkar-e-Toiba within Pakistan. Subsequently, the Lashkar led terrorist attacks in J&K and the rest of India came down significantly. Except for a few aberrations, that are too minor, there were no major terrorist attacks in India.

Fourth, the aforementioned three factors resulted in making the elections for J&K legislative assembly an inclusive one, and were the most successful. For the first time in the last two decades, the elections were held in a peaceful atmosphere, with no violence. In retrospect, the 2008 elections in J&K was the most positive event in the last two decades, and the environment during this phase was the most peaceful, despite the regional differences.

Because of all these reasons Pakistan's influence and interest hit the nadir in J&K during 2008-09. On the other hand, for India, the positive situation in J&K hit the highest point, only to fall once again. And what a disastrous fall it has been! India, in the last two years, since the 2008 elections in J&K, appears to be back at square one. Nothing, but a hara-kiri. Like the Indian cricket team at times, which manages to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, New Delhi gave up all its cards, by simply doing nothing.

The turning point for Pakistan in J&K came this year, when Kashmiri youths started their agitation. Neither the separatist leaders in Kashmir Valley nor Pakistan designed this youth unrest. In fact, it caught them by surprise. Since then, both the separatists and Pakistan are trying to reposition themselves to the changed situation within Kashmir valley. The time is ripe for them; for the waters are muddled and soaked with blood, and the Kashmiri youths are angry. This will suit Pakistan and the Hurriyat; for they have fodder now, who could be manipulated and exploited to suit their narrow political interests.

J&K: The Change within Pakistan

There has been a sudden change within Pakistan in the last two months, and there have been a series of Kashmir related activities within Pakistan. During

September-October 2010, there were at least two significant meetings/conferences/rallies in Islamabad and Lahore. The first one was a rally, almost a jihadi one, led by one of the Lashkar front - Tehrik Azadi-i-Kashmir (TAK) in Islamabad. This rally witnessed a carefully organized caravan – “Azad-i-Kashmir”, from Mirpur, starting three days earlier, reaching the venue via Kotli, Bagh and Muzafarabad. The organizers of this rally also organized a national conference, in which political parties including the PML-N and Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam. From Abdur Rehman Makki, the leader of the TAK to Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, there was a repeated emphasis on jihad as the only option to resolve Kashmir.

The second meeting/conference, this time in Lahore, was organized by the Jamaat-e-Islami, on Kashmir. The speakers included political leaders, and more importantly, editors and other representatives from the media. Some of the participants in this conference included Qazi Husain Ahmed (former JI chief), Majid Nizami (Editor in Chief of the the national daily - The Nation), Mushahid Husain (PML-Q Secretary General), Jehanir Badar (PPP's Secretary General), and Imran Khan. Most importantly, this meeting also included the Jamaat-ut-Dawa chief; Hafiz Muhammad Saeed and Muttahidda Jihad Council Chairman Syed Salahudin.

Besides the above meetings led by the political parties and organization, during the last few months, there is an increased shrill against India in Pakistani media on Kashmir. Comparing the violence in Kashmir to the intifada in Palestine, one could witness numerous editorials and articles in the mainstream English and vernacular media, lashing India and its security forces and accusing them of committing atrocities against the Kashmiris.

Clearly, there is a renewed effort being made to bring Kashmir back in the national debate within Pakistan, forcing the government to take action. It was not a surprise then, that the Lahore conference adopted a resolution demanding the government of Pakistan “to call an all parties conference for devising a national policy that could play a role in ending atrocities in Kashmir.”

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II PAKISTAN'S REPOSITIONING IN KASHMIR: ISLAMABAD'S FIVE LIKELY STRATEGIES

While it is evident that Pakistan is trying to reposition itself on (and in) Kashmir, it is imperative for India to find out the likely course of action that Pakistan may pursue vis-à-vis J&K, at the national, regional and international levels. One could identify the following five strategies that Pakistan may like to pursue.

Strategy 1: Bring Kashmir back in Pakistan's National Debate

As can be seen from the recent meetings and rallies within Pakistan, a clear effort is being made to bring Kashmir back on their national debate. The situation in Kashmir Valley and the increased international attention towards the ongoing violence provides an ideal platform for Islamabad to reposition itself. As for the beleaguered PPP, especially Zardari, this may even provide some breathing space by diverting national attention. Unfortunately, J&K has always been a smokescreen for the ruling elite – (political and military) - to gain legitimacy and divert the public mood.

What will be the likely fallouts of Kashmir issue assuming importance in Pakistan's national debate? Pakistan's much abused ISI and militant groups, especially the Lashkar-e-Taiba (and perhaps Jaish-e-Mohammad), along with the religious parties, are likely to gain credence within Pakistan's body politic. One should also keep in mind the happenings in Afghanistan and the FATA, and what is likely to happen over the next few years.

In the last few years, there has been substantial involvement of the local groups, from Punjab in the FATA and especially by the members of Jaish-e-Mohammad, Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, who, along with the TTP have been fighting the security forces in the FATA. Crudely termed the “Punjabi Taliban”, these groups have also been occasionally engaged in terrorist attacks in Lahore and Islamabad. Once the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and FATA comes to a conclusion (one way or the other, especially after the American exit), these battle hardened Punjabi groups are unlikely to stay in the FATA. Unlike the Central Asian militants and others belonging to the al Qaeda, the Punjabi groups are likely get back, for their base and families are in Punjab. They will return to Punjab, and engage themselves in a sectarian blood bath. In that scenario, Pakistan will have two options – either to fight them or to divert them into J&K.

Instead of fighting them (due to the lack of domestic consensus and the mayhem it will create), Islamabad will find it convenient to divert them elsewhere, most likely into J&K. Fighting India, after “defeating” the “evil Americans” may be more

attractive to the jihadis. The history will repeat itself; it will be almost similar to what happened during the first half of the 1990s.

Strategy 2: Reach out to the Hurriyat and the Kashmiri Youth

From now on, there will be an increased effort to repair Pakistan's image in Kashmir. While there is an increased anti-Indian sentiment within the Hurriyat and the stone throwing youths, there is not much love for Pakistan either. Many in Kashmir valley consider Pakistan as opportunistic, who is not genuinely interested in their future. Nor do the Kashmiri youths want to emulate Pakistan. Besides, Pakistan's failing status in the world is known to all.

Pakistan would like to change the above perception in Kashmir valley, as a part of its repositioning strategy. One is likely to witness an increased interaction between Pakistan and the Hurriyat leadership one pretext or the other. While one would witness statements from the highest levels on the significant contribution of the Hurriyat, organizations and individuals linked to Pakistan and its ISI will be asked to organize more political events inside and outside Pakistan, and highlight the Hurriyat's importance in resolving the Kashmir issue. One is also likely to witness back channel meetings between Pakistan and the Hurriyat; the latter will be assured of Pakistan's support. Musharraf will come under increased criticisms for his Kashmir policy, and leaders will highlight the need for getting back to "Pakistan's principled stand on Kashmir." Especially, with his announcement of his new party and intention to get back, PML-N is likely to get more critical about his U-turn in J&K.

While Pakistan would love to reach out to the youths, it will not be as easy, as it could do with the separatist leadership. Amongst the youths, while a section amongst them will be waving Pakistani flags during their protests, it is more out of their hatred against New Delhi, than any love for Islamabad. However, what India needs to be worried about is, the increased influence of radical ideology, led by certain underground groups. While Islam in Kashmir valley has always been famous for its Sufi nature, there is an onslaught, especially targeting the youths. While there is no visible Pakistan's direct involvement in this new phenomenon, groups such as the Lashkar has been engaged in finding a foothold to propagate their ideology as well. Increased inflow of financial transactions on one pretext or the other, from some of the Gulf countries, does have an ideological component attached to it. This phenomenon is not limited to Kashmir valley alone; the Muslim majority districts of Jammu region – Rajouri and Poonch, are already witnessing this. The recent violence in Mendhar (in Poonch district) over the alleged burning of the Holy Book, is an expression of this new trend.

New Delhi's road to Islamabad on J&K lies in improving its connectivity with Jammu and Srinagar. Pakistan can only fish, if the Kashmiri waters are muddied and unclear. Ensuring transparency and accountability will keep J&K clear.

Strategy 3: Revive Militancy in J&K

While the national debate and the rhetoric within Pakistan led by the radical groups are likely to gain new recruits, the government policy is also likely to change in terms of using the armed groups – from the restraint that we see today, to fishing in troubled waters. If not the PPP government, at least a section which is running the show in J&K will be tempted to revive militancy. Why not?

Is Pakistan testing the waters, by allowing Hafiz Saeed to appear in public and make statements on J&K? With the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008 almost becoming history, the Lashkar is waiting for a chance to renew militancy against India. With the Indo-Pak peace process remains frozen and unlikely to be revived in the near future, there is every chance that militancy will be revived and that it will start from J&K.

Despite the enhanced counter militancy grid and the fencing along the LoC, it is not impossible for the militants to cross-over into J&K through Mendhar or Kupwara sectors. Besides, Islamabad will always retain tight control over the militant groups; and those who try to form their own will become irrelevant, as the JKLF in early 1990s and a section of the Hizbul Mujahideen did during this decade. Even Syed Salahuddin is sidelined, which is being seen in their performance in Kashmir valley.

Strategy 4: Call for International Intervention

Fourth, there is likely to be an increased demand from Pakistan for international intervention. The recent speech by Pakistan's foreign minister in the United Nations was not merely an emotional rhetoric, but a carefully calibrated effort to raise the issue at the highest level. Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Pakistan's foreign minister led a diatribe in New York, with his statements within the UN and outside it. He has asked the US to "invest its political capital" in Kashmir as much as Washington is doing in the Middle East.

During his speech in the UNGA, Qureshi mentioned: "The Jammu and Kashmir dispute is about the exercise of the right to self-determination by the Kashmiri people through a free, fair and impartial plebiscite under the UN auspices...A peaceful resolution of Kashmir dispute in accordance with the

UN Resolutions and taking into account the aspirations of the Kashmiri people would create conducive atmosphere for durable peace and stability in the South Asian region...Pakistan reaffirms its complete solidarity with the Kashmiri people, and urges the international community to persuade India to end its repression in Kashmir."

Qureshi's UNGA speech is likely to provide the basis for Pakistan's subsequent statements on the issue in various platforms and their leaders meetings in different countries. With Obama's visit to India only few weeks ahead, this shrill will only increase, especially with regard to US intervention in the issue.

While, there is nothing new in the above rhetoric of Pakistan at the international level, what is likely to be of increased importance from an Indian perspective, is whether there is a Sino-Pak convergence on Kashmir. China has remained a silent spectator over the last decade, and in fact its silence was in India's favour on Indo-Pak issues. Since Kargil conflict, Beijing always insisted Kashmir as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. In fact, China refused to get involved and support Pakistan's position during the Kargil conflict.

However, much has changed in this decade vis-à-vis China's perceptions. While on the one hand, China is anxious to build road and rail links via Karakoram, on the other hand, Beijing is also apprehensive of the Indo-US nuclear deal. The recent tensions in India-China relations should be seen in this perspective. Moreover, there has been a heavy Chinese presence in Gilgit-Baltistan; while scholars like Selig Harrison hint a military component to this Chinese presence, what is well known has been the investments, especially in infrastructure and energy sectors by Beijing. The US will be forced to involve, especially with an increasing Chinese presence (at least that is what, Selig Harrison's article want to); given their deep entrenchment in the Af-Pak what form will this involvement take? Not easy to predict.

While there are no visible Sino-Pakistan linkages on J&K detrimental to India's interests, such a development should not be totally over ruled. What if? In such a (worst case) scenario, J&K will become a different issue.

Strategy 5: Bring Kashmir Back in the Bilateral Dialogue

Kashmir is likely to figure high on Pakistan's agenda in Indo-Pak dialogue. If one has to follow the statements made by Qureshi in New York recently, it is evident that Pakistan would like to make Kashmir, Siachen and water the primary issues. Gone are the days in which the PPP talked about placing Kashmir on the back burner and improving the Indo-Pak ties.

While on the one hand, Pakistan will pressurize the

international community to force India to give high priority to a Kashmir specific dialogue, on the other hand, it will be able to re-establish the lost ties with the separatists, by emphasizing "take Kashmiris into account" rhetoric.

III AN INDIAN RESPONSE?

All the above five strategies are not mutually exclusive. Pakistan may pursue some or all of them simultaneously. There may be a political cost and few wild cards. India needs to plan ahead for a political, and if there is a need, even a military response.

First of all, blaming Pakistan for everything that is happening in J&K is not the solution. The current unrest in J&K, first and foremost, is New Delhi's own making. After the wonderful efforts made by the security forces and the excellent response by the civil society in J&K, New Delhi lost the plot sometime after the 2008 elections. Both New Delhi and the other stakeholders failed to evolve a positive road map vis-à-vis J&K. Elections and the positive response by the civil society in 2008 elections was interpreted as the return of normalcy to J&K. Complacency set in; the round table conferences and working group reports became history and relegated to the dark chambers of the Home Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office. Why should they be pursued, if normalcy has returned to Kashmir?

Second, there was a total failure to anticipate what the losers of the 2008 elections will plan. From the Hurriyat to the PDP, the 2008 elections was a negative outcome for their survival. They have been waiting for an opportunity; and the youth unrest and follow up violence provided them an issue on a silver platter. They grabbed it first; and Pakistan followed suit.

The response to Pakistan should begin from the inside, by wresting control of the lost initiative. The All Party Delegation that visited J&K should be the starting point for New Delhi to re-engage itself. India should build confidence and maintain consistency vis-à-vis Kashmir. New Delhi's road to Islamabad on J&K lies in improving its connectivity with Jammu and Srinagar. Pakistan can only fish, if the Kashmiri waters are muddied and unclear. Ensuring transparency and accountability will keep J&K clear.

Also read "What Next after the All Party Delegation Visit?: A 3-C Strategy for Kashmir," IPCS Issue Brief 155.



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