

# THE CHALLENGE IN THE PULWAMA ATTACK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

In recent months, those with experience in monitoring Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan had been getting distinctly uncomfortable. There were signals emanating from Pakistan pointing to a new turn. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan was trying to make overtures to India and conveying that his government would be one with a difference, a 'Naya-Pakistan' as he called it. Pakistan Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa had earlier attempted to confound observers through a long interaction with the media, which came to be touted as the Bajwa Doctrine, and was 'supposed' to be a hand of friendship. The offer to open the Kartarpur Corridor and the fast-track progress to the conduct of ceremonies to launch the construction of the project were uncharacteristic. His presence at the ceremony on the Pakistani side appeared to reflect total consensus and support of the Army.

It was somehow the wrong time for Pakistan to be making peace overtures when the Indian elections were approaching. Pakistan could not have expected any big and strategic decisions, and sure enough India's response to everything was lukewarm. The circumstances did not permit any traction unless a firm commitment was given about the withdrawal of all support from across the border to terrorists.

Violence against Kashmiris: Whose purpose do the mobs serve, asks Omar Abdullah

Whenever Pakistan starts to speak the language of peace, it raises hackles in India because it seems evident that something unusual is in the offing and overtures are primarily there to bait India. It has been proved again at [Pulwama, with the most dastardly act perpetrated since the beginning of the 30-year-long proxy war in Jammu & Kashmir.](#)

Two issues are of relevance here. The first is that the return of the car bomb and the improvised explosive device (IED) to the Kashmir theatre was predicted for the last one year. The trend had died out after the last effective IED attack, on an Army bus in July 2008, and the last car bomb attack, again on an Army bus on the very same road, in 2004. IEDs had been rampant earlier but car bombs were few and far between. It was the progressive improvement in the fabrication of IEDs and car bombs in the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and the internal security environment of Pakistan that probably gave an impetus to perceptions about their potential usage once again in Kashmir.

Terrible Thursday: on Pulwama terror attack

The Pakistani experience had also much to do with religiously radicalised young men strapped with explosives detonating themselves at gatherings of people — the suicide bomber as against the suicide fighter. Suicide bombing was neither experienced in earlier years nor has it manifested itself yet in Kashmir. Its threat potential, of course, remains live and its entry could further change the nature of the proxy war.

Pakistan's deep state has been aware that the Indian security forces have achieved much in the last two years in terms of neutralisation of terrorists, although almost the same number have been added through fresh recruitment or infiltration. In order to reduce the domination and effectiveness achieved by the security forces and to limit their freedom of movement, the reintroduction of these devices could achieve much. That is because the unpredictability factor of IEDs and car bombs is so high that it forces a larger than normal deployment of security forces.

The second relevant issue, or observation, is that Pakistan's self-confidence has been increasing. This has been despite the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) surveillance, its reduced foreign exchange reserves and a failing economy. The backing from China and, most importantly, Pakistan's enhanced geostrategic and geopolitical significance in the light of the U.S. decision to pull out in full from Afghanistan have also contributed to it. The moment that decision on Afghanistan was taken, Pakistan once again acquired leverage with the big powers and all stakeholders for peace in Afghanistan. The realisation that it held the key to the return of the Taliban, the upholding of all its agreements with the foreign forces and future stability, gave Pakistan a strategic boost. The U.S. started courting it in a reversal of President Donald Trump's policy which had questioned the utility of such nations which had taken excess U.S. funding as aid and never delivered strategic advantage to it.

#### Concern in Valley over "threats" to Kashmiri students, traders outside State

It is the first sign of Pakistan's increasing confidence that can be seen in the [Pulwama attack executed by the Jaish-e-Mohammed \(JeM\)](#), an organisation virtually sponsored and owned by Pakistan's intelligence agencies. Initial investigation suggests careful planning, infiltration of an 'IED doctor' (a technical person capable of fabricating IEDs) and a module fully functional at work with a network of overground workers. An apparent risk analysis in Pakistan would have revealed that with the internal health and state of equipment of the Indian armed forces under intense negative discussion in India, the feasibility of a response would be remote. An energetic impetus to terror would follow and this would probably have an effect on the electoral prospects of the current National Democratic Alliance government, besides preparing ground for extended violence into the future. Time and again Pakistan has been wrong in the assessments it makes.

While the mortal remains of 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel were transported for last rites to cities and villages all over India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly promised retribution for the loss and emphasised that he had given the freedom of choosing the time, mode and place to the Indian Army. A rare political consensus, short-lived no doubt, has appeared in New Delhi, and the media is discussing military options. To be realistic, that is how the modern world functions, on the power of public opinion.

If that be so, what options does the Indian government have? The diplomatic one is already under execution although the energy of Indian diplomacy to paint Pakistan red must flow longer and focus on not only important capitals of the world but also significant international think tanks and media. The Most Favoured Nation status and measures involving control of water under the Indus Waters Treaty remain soft options, sans much optics. It's the military domain which is demanding Mr. Modi's focus. A risk analysis would already be under way to examine a range of options or combinations. It could start with covert operations which can be ongoing, to trans-border raids several notches higher than the surgical strikes and targeting Pakistan Army resources as against terrorist infrastructure, and surgical air strikes against terrorist bases inside Pakistan. Ground-based operations restricted to Jammu & Kashmir and harking back to some of the options of yesteryear could form a part of the overall response. However, it should be remembered that Pakistan will not permit such actions without its military response, which too would be robust.

The Indian national leadership would do well not to be guided by the immediacy of electoral considerations; national security interests transcend this. Whatever are the selected options, the two things that would make for stronger execution are political consensus and management of internal social cohesion. India cannot achieve its strategic objectives if Kashmiris remain targets of physical abuse and harassment, and minorities are vilified on social media. It is a difficult time for India and the leadership has to work overtime to ensure that the Indian armed forces have a 'firm base' to operate from; that is always a military need anyway.

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