

THE SHIFTING BATTLEFIELDS

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The ongoing crisis in South Asia is a critical reminder about the alarming ability of Pakistan-supported non-state actors to ignite a conflict between the two nuclear armed adversaries. The risk of conflict escalation in South Asia as a result of terrorist actions such as the one in Pulwama, is perhaps one of the most underappreciated threats to international peace and security.

Though the situation has shown signs of de-escalation, sporadic incidents keep the security environment volatile. The crisis is far from over — which justifies expending all the intellectual capital in either decoding the ongoing military calculus or predicting the likely future. However, it would be worthwhile to step back and try to understand the strategic calculus, if any, behind the Pulwama attacks. What strategic or political benefit would Pakistan's ISI accrue from such an attack, knowing well that such acts can potentially result in a formidable armed reprisal by India, further increasing Pakistan's international isolation? Pakistan, with its fragile economic situation, can hardly afford a full-scale conflict under present circumstances.

Similar questions were asked almost a decade ago when even the CIA and FBI documented that the 2008 Mumbai attacks were supported and funded by serving and retired members of ISI. Steve Coll, in his recent book, *Directorate S*, an authoritative account of the ISI, also poses a similar question: "Why would ISI do it?", knowing well that the threads of Mumbai could directly be linked to Pakistan. Any attack by groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba on Indian soil is, unsurprisingly, understood by the Indian government to have been authorised by the Pakistan spy agency. The ISI must appreciate that in any such conflict, the majority of the world opinion would lean favourably towards the country that has borne the brunt of terrorism. So, why would the ISI risk a confrontation with India by allowing or supporting actions like Pulwama?

The answer may lie in a well-thought out and tested strategic calculus: A risk/risk trade off assessment by the ISI in the event of possible US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US withdrawal and the end of the Taliban-led war against US forces in Afghanistan may, on the one hand, come as a big shot in the arm for Pakistan's status as a primary player in Afghanistan. But, at the same time, it has the potential to rekindle jihadist violence in Pakistan, reminiscent of the late 2000s. The return of thousands of Pakistani jihadists from Afghanistan poses a disproportionate challenge to Pakistan's internal security scenario.

Hence, the timing of the Pulwama attack may underscore a larger strategic gameplan by the ISI to preempt the danger of terrorist violence returning to Pakistan. The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan will potentially rob Pakistani jihadist groups of the *raison d'être* of fighting jihad in Afghanistan. The Taliban has also promised not to host any foreign terrorist group as a part of the impending deal, a commitment that the Taliban may initially be inclined to keep. There is a real possibility, which the Pakistan's security establishment fully appreciates, that these returning jihadists may re-ignite violence not only in Pakistan's tribal areas but also in the urban centres. Past experience has shown that the ISI is unambiguous in realising the need to provide an alternative battleground to these returning jihadists. Thus, shifting the theatre of

violence away from Pakistan and back into Kashmir may not be considered an imprudent risk trade-off. The ISI has employed a similar strategy with a fair bit of success in the past, too.

Immediately after the end of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, thousands of returning Pakistani fighters posed a formidable challenge to the country's internal security environment. Pakistan, however, had already worked out a plan to prevent these murderous groups from returning. The ISI was successfully able to channelise their jihadist impulses by diverting them to a new battlefield in Kashmir, where ISI-supported Kashmiri groups had started a full-blown insurgent movement since early-1990. This was how groups like Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Taiba made their way into Kashmir in the early nineties.

Similarly, in the mid-2000s, after General Pervez Musharraf joined the US-led global war on terror, the domestic jihadist groups were incensed by what they regarded as Pakistan's betrayal of its jihadi brethren. Moreover, the Red Mosque incident proved to be a watershed in Pakistan's struggle with Islamic militancy. The siege of the mosque in 2007, which housed hundreds of radicals, resulted in the killing of more than 100 militants and civilians by the Pakistan armed forces. The Red Mosque narrative became a rallying cry for jihadists to mobilise thousands of radicalised individuals against what they called the apostate Pakistani state— giving legitimacy to groups like Tehreek e Taliban (TTP) to wage jihad against the Pakistani state. The insurgency in Pakistan's tribal and urban areas took a heavy toll, both in terms of civilian and military casualties. Between 2007 and 2009, more than 5,500 people were killed in Pakistan in terrorist violence alone.

It was under these circumstances that the ISI started planning a spectacular strike at multiple targets in Mumbai in an attempt to shift the focus of violence away from its own territory. Coll suggests that the ISI may have sought a perverse sort of credibility from the Mumbai assault to prove to its own restive clients that it was not going soft. David Coleman Headley, a key planner of the Mumbai attacks, in his testimony before a US federal court, revealed that the attacks essentially served two critical purposes: First, it re-legitimised the ISI as an honest supporter of jihad in the eyes of domestic jihadi groups. Second, and the most salient, it helped shift the theatre of violence away from the domestic soil of Pakistan, into India. In Headley's words, "ISI seemed convinced that after Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) something needed to be done".

As a peace deal between the Taliban and the US looks more likely on the horizon, Pakistan can foresee the spectre of violence returning to its homeland. Even more than a decade after, the Red Mosque episode continues to haunt Pakistan's security establishment and inspires jihadi movements in Pakistan. Al Qaeda and other militant groups, even today, continue to use the storming of the mosque as a rallying cry to fight the Pakistani government and its military. The returning jihadists from Afghanistan can potentially respond to such calls and re-ignite jihadist violence inside Pakistan.

The recent attack by the JeM on Indian soldiers in Kashmir may very well, therefore, be seen as a part of this strategic manoeuvre to escalate jihadist violence in Kashmir and prepare a future battlefield for returning Pakistani fighters from Afghanistan. Such an outcome, the ISI can fully appreciate, comes with considerable risk: Serious foreign policy implications for Pakistan. The international community is fast losing its appetite to condone terrorist violence of any kind. But realistically, for ISI, this may still appear to be a better risk trade-off than bearing the jihadist brunt in its own backyard.

Pakistan, however, needs to realise that it cannot bring lasting peace on its soil by merely exporting violence. The solution is to completely remove these threats. The key to successfully eliminating these radical groups lies in Pakistan's will to completely divest itself of its terror protégés, and stop using them for short-sighted strategic advantage.

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