



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

05/19

EXPLORING THE LARGER CANVAS THAT LED TO PULWAMA ATTACK

Dr. Shalini Chawla
Senior Fellow, CAPS

Keywords: Pulwama attack, Masood Azar, Terrorist attack, India-Pakistan, Jaish-e-Muhammad

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, in his message to India on February 19th, blatantly denied Pakistan's role in the Pulwama terror attack which killed 40 CRPF personnel. The attack has generated a lot of grief and anger within India and numerous debates regarding how India should respond to the attack have inundated the media. Imran Khan, in his address, once again played a victim card that Pakistan is itself suffering from terrorism and also asserted that the 'New Pakistan' is against terrorism. As expected, he made a 'sincere effort' to send the message that Pakistan *would retaliate to any Indian retaliation*. There is hardly anything new in the new Prime Minister's response, the messaging was along expected lines and is very much in sync with Pakistan's continued strategy of 'bleed India through a thousand cuts'. Pakistan has used sub-conventional warfare for the last 40 years and 'terror' is not only a low cost medium, but also provides the ease to adopt a position of 'denial' for Pakistan. Masood Azhar, head of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), enjoys full patronage

of Pakistan's deep state and functions as its strategic arm along with Lashkar-e-Taiba, which now enjoys the political platform extended during the 2018 elections.

Pakistan's response came after four days of the gruesome act and Imran Khan's position was that he did not want to distract attention from the Saudi Prince's visit to Pakistan which has resulted in the announcement of \$20bn Saudi investments. The response has clearly come after due consultation with the Pakistani military and ISI which facilitated Imran's coming into power last year.

There are a number of debates and arguments regarding the attack including the one that the JeM would want the current Indian government to win the upcoming Indian elections and continue in power as it serves their cause of 'alienation' within India. While these debates can be accepted or rejected depending on how convincing the reasoning is, there is no doubt that the attack was planned and executed

by the Pakistan military as a continuation of its policy of using terror as a foreign policy tool.

Examination of the developments within and outside Pakistan would help to understand the timing of the attack. Imran Khan came into power with the military's unstinted support as the deep state seems to be convinced about the former cricketer's ceaseless ability to endorse military's strategy, policy (domestic and foreign) and posturing. Imran's party did cherish the support of the extremist parties and his support and love for the Pakistani Taliban has been well acknowledged in the Pakistani media. Not only was he in support of the opening of a Taliban office in Peshawar, he backed the terror groups' system of justice in an interview to BBC HARDtalk. The 2018 elections in Pakistan gave a boost to the extremist parties which duly propagate anti-India sentiments. The appointment of a new ISI chief, Lieutenant General Syed Asim Munir, and army chief General Bajwa's effort to build on his heroic status just before his retirement certainly added to the timing and stature of the attack. Although the military is extremely proud of the anti-terror operations, Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad, the fact is that these operations have targeted Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and not the anti-India groups in any form. Hafiz Saeed and Masood Azhar continue to hold public meetings with hate speeches. Reduction in the number of terror attacks in Pakistan is in no form indicative

of reduction of Islamabad's engagement with the anti-India terror groups.

Pakistan has been bolstered by the Chinese support and the much debated \$60bn investment in China-Pakistan Economic corridor. The Chinese support has been on conventional military build-up, nuclear build-up, playing the economy's saviour and very importantly, also on the diplomatic front. China has perpetually blocked every Indian move to ban Masood Azhar in the United Nations. Beijing has never questioned Pakistan's strategic calculus and, in fact, has offered Pakistan 'prominent' support at times of crisis, conveying the message that Pakistan would have China on its side despite all its actions and policies and irrespective of the way the world looks at Pakistan. The support has allowed Pakistan to stay immune to India's efforts to isolate Pakistan.

US took a firm stance against Pakistan and issued repeated warnings against its continued support to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. The International Monetary Fund, where US enjoys a large stake, took a tough position demanding more transparency from Pakistan over CPEC transactions in return of a much-needed IMF bailout. Financial Action Task Force (FATF) placed Pakistan on the 'grey list' and warned it to be put on the black list if Pakistan failed to take satisfactory measures to control money laundering and funding of terror groups. The US position did give some optimism and there was an expectation of a temporary

pause to Pakistan's support to the terror activities. But developments in Afghanistan and US' direct negotiations with the Taliban, where Pakistan military played a crucial role led to some critical developments. Firstly, Pakistan's role in facilitating US-Taliban talks has softened US' stance with Pakistan. Pakistan is conscious of US' anxiety to move out of Afghanistan. Secondly, Taliban and the ideologically aligned groups including the JeM and LeT are elated and celebrating their victory for the second time against a super power. The feeling that these groups cannot be defeated militarily has empowered the terror groups to continue their acts. Thirdly, if the negotiations led by Zalmay Khalilzad do succeed in bringing a solution to the Afghan situation, and Taliban are accommodated in the governance, it would be most favorable for Pakistan. Pakistan would actually manage to achieve what it initially worked towards – bringing Taliban into power in the 1990s and then perpetually supporting the Taliban against the Afghan regime as well as the US and NATO forces.

Although Imran Khan, in his message, claimed that it did not suit Pakistani interests to initiate a terror act at the time of Saudi Prince's visit, the developments internally and externally were quite conducive for Islamabad to conduct a strike. India, along with all the steps traditionally taken to counter terrorism, as a policy must also keep a watchful eye on the developments within and outside Pakistan which give it a space to

conduct terrorism. Clearly, some of the developments are crucial including: Military's all out support to Imran Khan; extremism gaining ground in Pakistan; China's strengthened position on supporting Pakistan (on all fronts!); US negotiations with Taliban, where the group is negotiating with a position of strength, and support from Saudi Arabia and UAE to Pakistan, which weakens the impact of New Delhi's efforts to isolate Pakistan. Pakistani conviction for use of terror is too deep to change but the intensity of its actions certainly varies given the developments in and around Pakistan.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])