



Pakistan's Narrative and Propaganda War Post Abrogation of Article 370



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A series of expected reactions have surfaced (primarily in social media) from Islamabad since August 5th, when the Indian government revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution ending the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and announced the bifurcation of the state into two Union Territories, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. The decision is indeed historic and does allow J&K to reap the benefits of India's growth. The decision, supported by a majority of Indians, is purely an internal matter and definitely not part of the United Nations resolution. International actors, including United States, Russia and UAE have issued statements supporting the fact that it's an internal matter for India. China, as expected, has positioned itself in favour of Pakistan and requested for a United Nations Security Council Meeting that took place on August 16th in New York.

Modi government's decision has caused immense panic and restlessness in Pakistan, which is not surprising given the fact that Kashmir has been the key issue around which the dominance of their deep state and the perceived threat perceptions survived and thrived for 70 years. Pakistan military and civilian leadership ingeniously managed the 'threat perceptions' to a level sufficient to bolster the desired strategic, political and economic interests. Interestingly, Director General ISPR, Major General Asif Ghafoor, tweeted (August 6, 2019) from his official account that "Pakistan never recognized the sham Indian efforts to legalise its occupation of Jammu & Kashmir through Article 370 or 35A decades ago, efforts which have been revoked by India itself". Even though Islamabad didn't recognize Article 370, the reaction to the revocation has been very significant.

In an immediate response to the revocation of Article 370, Pakistan took the decision to downgrade diplomatic relations with India, suspend the Sumjhauta Express train and announce cutting down trade ties (which are not substantial!) with India. The civilian and military leadership,

scholars and journalists have been issuing a trail of tweets condemning Modi government's decision and expressing immense sympathy and 'concern' for the Kashmiri population. It is quite ironic when Pakistan talks about human rights, well-being, and, more importantly, about press freedom given a long history of 'suppression of free voices/expression' within the country.

Pakistan is likely to react on various fronts to deal with the probable loss of its "flash point". At present, the state faces innumerable challenges within and does not seem to have too many choices. It would be useful to analyse how Pakistan's narrative and posturing will take shape – on the domestic front as well as on the external front.

Internally, Pakistan military and the civilian leadership is likely to keep up the momentum of condemning India's decision and repeatedly assert the 'injustice' on New Delhi's part. The leadership in Pakistan has convinced the Pakistani population over decades regarding their 'right to fight for Kashmir', has assured them that the resolution of Kashmir issue will be in Pakistan's favour and a significant amount of national resources (at a social and economic cost) has been invested in the war for Kashmir. Thus, the effort to keep up the anger against India, and also, the (perceived) threat to Pakistan's survival is likely to continue. Although this seems like business as usual for Pakistan but there will be more focus on using Kashmir as a unifying factor on the domestic front.

The UNSC held a closed door meeting to discuss Kashmir as a result of Pakistan's request to China. The meeting was important from Pakistan's point of view as Imran Khan needs to convince his domestic audience of his efforts to keep the Kashmir issue alive. Not much was achieved from the meeting as the council members did not come out with a collective statement to the press. India has received consistent support from France, United States and some smaller nations. However, Pakistan will continue to raise the issue at the UN and this is very much in sync with its past efforts, where Islamabad has tried very hard to internationalise 'Kashmir'.

Imran Khan, in his inexorable hate tweets, has been calling the Modi government "fascist" and "supremacist". Every succeeding tweet intensifies in bitterness and the latest one on August 18, 2018, actually talks about the threat emerging from India's nuclear weapons to global security:

"The world must also seriously consider the safety & security of India's nuclear arsenal in the control of the fascist, racist Hindu supremacist Modi govt"

The use of 'hate' and 'religion' to gather support against India has been an integral part of Pakistan's strategy against India. This policy has had ideological, social and also security ramifications for the Pakistani state which struggles to deal with sectarian and regional conflicts and prominent extremism. Above all, at this point of time, the anti-India rhetoric, fight for Kashmir and threat to Pakistan's survival against a 'hegemonic, arrogant India' are also good to distract the Pakistani population from the manifold internal problems, including the economic crisis, PTI's failure to complete its election promises and, very importantly, the growing overall resentments within the country. Pakistan is facing opposition internally on three critical fronts; Baloch resentment for continued alienation and not receiving their due share in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has gathered immense support, even though the military has tried hard to suppress the Pashtun voices; and, the strong voices of the opposition parties which have been attracting large crowds in support of PML (N) leader Nawaz Sharif's innocence and release.

General Bajwa has been given extension of another three years, citing seriousness of the regional security situation. The extension does signify the military's complete control on Imran Khan, who, to a large extent, owes his political positioning to Bajwa's all-out support. But, Pakistan's military options appear to be limited, given the fact that the military actions in the past have not gone in Pakistan's favour in any form. While it will continue to modernize and sustain defence procurement efforts with its all-weather friend China, it is unlikely to consider military action against India anytime soon. Pakistan's economic crisis, China's position during the Balakot strikes, Beijing's struggle to deal with the Hong Kong protests, probable withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and international pressures do restrict the military option (which had failed miserably during Kargil in 1999). Irrespective of this, the need for military and nuclear build-up is likely to continue to be highlighted and justified.

The option of intensifying militancy in the valley and other parts of India is viable by Pakistan and the non-state actors it has trained, equipped and nurtured for decades, but how far it can go to use these assets in the current situation remains uncertain. Islamabad has been under an international spotlight for the last few months, and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have taken a tough stance pressuring Pakistan to act against terrorist outfits. Given this situation, Pakistan's capacity to intensify terrorism as a response looks rather restricted.

On the diplomatic front, Pakistan will use its maximum energy to launch an offensive against India. It has intensified, and is expected to further intensify its narrative on the "state of Kashmir" and

demand international action against the issue. In the coming months, Islamabad is likely to highlight Kashmir on every international forum. It has announced the decision to have Kashmir desks in all its embassies across the globe and plans to have discussions on 'human rights violations in Kashmir' in various parts of the world. Pakistan clearly has few options at home and on the military front, and thus, a narrative and propaganda war through its diplomatic channels is something the world will continue to witness from 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])

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