



JAMMU AND KASHMIR - BEYOND THE HEADLINES

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The month of October that has gone past was one of the most violent months in recent times for Jammu and Kashmir. 44 deaths including 19 terrorists, 13 civilians and 12 personnel of security forces is certainly a (relatively) higher count when compared to recent trends of violence in the newly carved Union Territory.¹

Ever since the landmark decision of bifurcating the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union territories and the abrogation of Article 370, two distinct & conflicting narratives have dominated the discourse on Kashmir. The narrative of “normalcy and unprecedented development” which is primarily

State driven is being disputed fiercely by those who claim that the situation has instead worsened and the local alienation is on the rise. Given the historic emotional baggage that is attached to Kashmir, it is quite easy to get swayed by these two extreme narratives.

It is thus imperative for the policy makers, security establishment and all other stakeholders to move beyond the headlines and discern subtle shifts that are clearly evident in the regional landscape.

Ways of Terror: The New and the Old

The security forces have over the years managed to neutralize the majority of armed cadres of various terrorist outfits. The number of terrorists in the hinterland has generally remained between 200 and 250. While this achievement is truly commendable, it also

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The constant attrition in their ranks and much reduced shelf-life of terrorists has forced the terrorist organizations to rethink and refine their strategy. While the focus seems to be on survival, an increase in the number of “low risk - high impact” actions to reiterate their presence has emerged as their preferred course of action.² While this is not something new, it is the selection of targets that has come as an alarming surprise. Targeted killings were always a part of the

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strategy of the Pakistan sponsored terrorist organizations in Jammu and Kashmir, but it was predominantly local security personnel, suspected informers and political workers who were at the receiving end of such life threats. Over the past few weeks, terrorists have given these killings a vicious communal turn and shifted their focus to Hindus and non-locals. The successful execution of this strategy of specific targeting has immediately brought media focus & national attention which terrorists so desperately needed. The subsequent unease and fear caused amongst minorities especially Kashmiri Pandits is natural particularly because they are still carrying the emotional scars of their mass exodus of the 1990s. Unfortunately, the national impact of such targeted killings is even more significant as it feeds into the communal polarisation that is being witnessed across the country.

Although security agencies have taken precautionary measures to prevent any further large scale killings, occasional incidents are still taking place.³ While it is understandable that full proof personal security cannot be provided to every vulnerable section, more comprehensive arrangements need to be made to ensure that this terror tactic doesn't succeed. While the deployment of additional forces has been done,⁴ this may not be enough and additional focus should be placed on enhancing the intelligence grid and robust street policing. It must also be emphasized at all forums that unless civil society in Kashmir raises its voice and rejects this violent madness, peace will remain elusive.

Terror across Pir Panjal

Another significant development that merits close attention is the sharp increase in the terror activities in the Poonch - Rajouri region. The unusually long encounter in mid-October in the Thanamandi area which resulted in nine fatal casualties of Rashtriya Rifles has highlighted the attempts of terrorists to re-establish their presence across the Pir Panjal ranges.⁵ While the last two years have seen a rise in infiltration attempts through this region, the presence of resident terrorist groups in the Poonch - Rajouri region seems to be the ultimate objective of terror outfits.⁶ The reported shifting of forces from the hinterland in response to the escalation in Eastern Ladakh is likely to have created some voids which can be exploited by terrorists to establish their presence.⁷

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Although it is encouraging that a large segment of the population in this belt, having experienced the peace dividends, is no longer sympathetic to the terrorists, the ability of the terrorist - separatist nexus to foment trouble by creating pockets of support in the Pir Panjal region cannot be underestimated.

Over the last few months, terrorist tanzeems have also exploited modern technologies such as encrypted communications & use of drones to transship warlike stores across the borders.⁸ The use of drones for the failed attack on Jammu Air Force Station in June this year⁹ was a bold maneuver by terrorists and has probably not been replicated only because it might draw an escalated Indian response to cross border terrorism and upset the Pakistan calculations

Pakistan – An Unfinished Agenda

Pakistan's current priorities are effective management of its internal situation and ensuring stability on western border. It is apparent that once these immediate internal goals are achieved, the military establishment will lessen the curbs on India centric terror outfits and unleash them for achieving its strategic objectives.

While India, in its endeavor to give peace a chance has agreed for cease fire on the Line of Control (LoC), the current phase of calm suits the Pakistan Army the most as it allows them to focus on its own backyard. The Indian Armed Forces must exploit this as a deterrent and always be prepared to inflict punitive actions at short notice in case there is any significant escalation in Pakistan sponsored terror activities within Jammu and Kashmir.

There are already a lot of apprehensions regarding the impact of the Taliban takeover

of Afghanistan. While this will surely embolden radical terrorist organisations, there is unlikely to be a large-scale influx of terrorists into Jammu and Kashmir as the counter infiltration grid along the Line of Control (LoC) is fairly robust.

Tightening the Noose

In the current scenario, security forces will have to reorient themselves for neutralizing the emerging threats. The use of OGWs, sleeper cells and what are being officially termed as “hybrid terrorists” for small scale terror attacks¹⁰ presents new challenges which have operational and legal implications for security agencies. The best practices of conducting people friendly operations while avoiding collateral damage must be diligently ensured. The tendency of law enforcement institutions to frequently impose strict curbs and mass restrictions should also be reviewed and more humane and selective measures need to be evolved.¹¹

Since the security forces have managed to achieve physical domination over terrorist outfits, they will now be judged more by their failures rather than their successes. An odd tactical reversal, like in the Poonch sector recently,¹² is bound to be exploited fully by terror outfits & their sympathizers in order to prove their efficacy.

Apart from the attrition caused by security forces, Pakistan sponsored terror has also been adversely affected due to some recent bold steps taken by the local administration.¹³ The dismissal of more than a dozen government employees in the last one year due to their alleged links with terrorists, in accordance with Article 311(2)(c) of the Constitution, might appear arbitrary and harsh but its positive effect on checking subversion is tremendous.¹⁴ Similarly, relentless efforts by the NIA to trace and investigate funding channels have also caused much discomfort to the Terrorist - Separatist Nexus.¹⁵

Information Warfare or “The Battle of Narratives” has therefore become even more important. The Government approach to counter false propaganda especially in the cyber domain is critical. Although a number of initiatives such as surveillance and reporting of suspected identities have been taken with positive results, more robust measures need to be evolved.¹⁶

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Development Initiatives

It is also important that the situation in Jammu and Kashmir is not seen merely through the security prism. The abrogation of article 370 was accompanied by loud promises of unwavering commitment by the political leadership.¹⁷ A number of announcements about large scale infrastructure projects, economic investments and other benefits have since been made by the Government.¹⁸ It is critical that these projects move beyond grand announcements and bureaucratic red tape, and are immediately implemented. Certain other measures like renaming of institutions after the martyrs,¹⁹ conduct of tourist festivals and cultural events such as open air theatre on Dal Lake may appear cosmetic to some, but the optics and impact of such actions in effectively challenging the separatist notions embedded in some sections of population is significant.

In order to meet the aspirations of common man, the Central Government and local administration has to ensure that tangible effects of these development initiatives are seen on ground. Although political parties in Jammu and Kashmir have a dubious track record of political opportunism by exploiting the separatist sentiments. Encouragement of grass root political activities will still be a key enabler in gauging public sentiment & generating goodwill. While delimitation exercise currently being undertaken in Jammu and Kashmir may emerge as a potential flash point,²⁰ it is ultimately the conduct of assembly elections and reported promise of grant of statehood that will shape the future trajectory of events.²¹

Conclusion

The onset of winters generally brings in a snowy silence and bouts of languid inactivity in Jammu and Kashmir. It would however be tragic if the momentum of kinetic and non-kinetic efforts made in the last few years is not suitably accelerated.

The road to peace and stability in Jammu and Kashmir is certainly long and uneasy but there are enough positive landmarks to indicate that if the nation takes appropriate measured steps, it will firmly be on the right path towards achieving desired objective.

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