

# **Pulwama Crisis Redux**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

Noam Chomsky had once said that “some kind of settlement in Kashmir is crucial for both India and Pakistan. It is also tearing India apart with horrible atrocities in the region which is controlled by Indian armed forces. This is feeding right back into society even in the domain of elementary civil rights.” In the wake of Pulwama incident, India cut a sorry figure by repeating its longstanding tactics, despite such cautions. Thanks to statesmanship and restraint of Pakistani leadership, a nuclear exchange was averted. The Subcontinent has been hostage to inimical dispute over Kashmir and Sir Creek between the two nuclear powers. Crises continue to erupt like unwanted leaves regrow even if the trees are hacked repeatedly. Pulwama is yet another example of how an unsettled dispute manifests in crises and conflicts in which nuclear taboo has not been crossed “yet.” The clearer picture has emerged in last two months and an accurate assessment can be made on what happened, why it matters, and what are the possible ways forward.

## **What Happened**

The Indian claim that Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) was responsible for the attack on occupation forces in Pulwama has been busted. Much to India’s chagrin, UNSC’s 1267 Committee designated JeM’s founder Masood as a global terrorist for his involvement in Afghanistan, not India or disputed Kashmir. The attack was conducted by the Afzal Guru group, which is an indigenous freedom movement in Indian-held Kashmir and has revolted against Indian illegal occupation and brutalities. The attacker had been repeatedly in custody of Indian occupation forces, where he was maltreated, and presumably took a revenge.

Jumping the gun, India peculiarly blamed Pakistan and launched an air strike inside Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on February 26<sup>th</sup>. Conscious of consequences of attacking Pakistani mainland and aping big power behaviour, the strike was characterised as counter-terror non-military non-civilian operation. The myth of a claimed hit on a so-called JeM camp at Balakot and killing of 350 militants was immediately broken. The air strike was reportedly launched by a 5-6 nautical mile incursion in Kashmir and use of stand-off Israeli supplied Spice missiles.

Pakistan gave an equal and swift response and took down two Indian aircraft and captured one pilot who ejected after his MiG-21 Bison was shot down. The Indian Chief of the Army Staff was reportedly present at the Brigade Headquarters on the Indian side on that fateful day. General Rawat has maintained a low profile thereafter.

As a gesture to de-escalate crisis, Prime Minister Imran Khan soon returned captured Indian fighter pilot to India. This statesmanship and restraint were praised by all and sundry, including sane voices in India. It was only after capture of that pilot that India came out of denial mode and the international community became serious about the intervention, and mediated de-escalation of crisis.

As disclosed by Prime Minister Modi during an election rally, he had readied nuclear armed missiles and threatened their use if their pilot was not returned. Likewise, as per Indian Navy statement, their two nuclear submarines and carrier battle groups had mobilised in the crisis. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, Pakistan spotted an Indian submarine close to its territorial waters and instead of torpedoing it, exercised extreme restraint and forced it to reverse its course. Any incident at sea could have led to a severe escalation and nuclear exchange.

### **Why it Matters**

Many international experts linked Pulwama crisis to elections in India. Even some Indian experts were of the view that PM Modi had used the crisis and made false claims to improve his ratings and increase his political fortune.

Since Pakistan was not involved in the attack on Indian occupation forces, it is quite possible that Pulwama was re-enactment of Indian false flag operations. There is a pattern that whenever Pakistan is about to raise Kashmir issue in a big manner or there is a high-profile event in the region, India raises an October Surprise and creates a security situation as a diversionary tactic.

This well-tried ruse has apparently been exposed this time because even inside voices doubted the motive of Indian actions. Pathankot incident in February 2016 was timed before UN General Assembly's annual moot in which Pakistani premier was to raise Kashmir issue. Pakistani delegation that visited Pathankot for joint investigation reportedly found out that the piquet around Pathankot airbase was removed few hours before the attack and the target site's lights were switched off as if to give an uninterrupted entry. The investigations fizzled once Pakistanis raised more questions. In June 2016, DG of Indian National Investigation Agency reported on media that no traces of Pakistani involvement could be found. The list of Indian false flag operations against Pakistan is long, and includes blames for a number of terror attacks on Indian soil. Reality is no more a secret.

While Pakistan is successfully overcoming extremism, and fighting terrorism, it is worrying to note that India is openly embracing terrorism and extremism. This developing extremist mind-set is too dangerous for a nuclear-armed state that claims being the largest democracy. Indian Naval Officer Kulbushan Yadav was captured in Pakistan and admitted his involvement in terrorism in Pakistan and association with Indian RAW. The recent killing of Pakistanis in Turbat was reportedly done by RAW's proxies. Former American Secretary of Defence had stated in 2013 that India was creating troubles for Pakistan through Afghanistan. Top Indian leadership, which includes PM and National Security Advisor, has claimed using terrorism as an instrument of policy against Pakistan. It is well known that Indian ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)'s veritable

arm. RSS is known for its extremism and militant outlook, which is BJP's ideologue. The level of tolerance in the society continues stooping down. Both RSS and BJP's cow vigilantes have killed hundreds of Muslims just for trading in cow meat.

Since 2001, India has started painting Kashmir independence struggle as terrorism. However, use of armed struggle violence by Kashmiris is their legitimate right under international law. Likewise, India has used its influence to fudge maps of Kashmir. Before the incorrect Kashmiri maps become a norm, PEMRA and HEC may advise Pakistani media and academia to use accurate maps by the Surveyor General, as even UN and some Chinese maps are currently showing AJ&K as well as IHK as Indian territory.

Indian leadership has displayed irresponsible behaviour that does not gel with their ambition to become a big land, air, sea, and space power and sit at the UN high table. Their irresponsible behaviour was punctuated by PM threatening '*qatal kee raat*' – *literally translated as night of (nuclear) massacre*, testing of anti-satellite weapon, deployment of nuclear submarines, threatening missile strikes, claiming that nuclear weapons are not kept of Diwali's pyrotechnics, boasting finger on a big nuclear button and going for a pre-meditated pre-emptive air strike in response to its false flag operation. Owing to Pakistani mature nuclear behaviour and restraint, an Indian nuclear pre-emption was avoided.

This crisis also displayed that contrary to the perception that Pakistan has inferiority in conventional military power, its Air Force could win a limited combat and that its conventional deterrence worked, averting nuclear deterrence breakdown.

### **Possible Ways Forward**

"I sincerely hope that they (relations between Pakistan and India) will be friendly and cordial. We have a great deal to do... and think that we can be of use to each other and to the world."

*Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah.*

This vision of the founding father still prevails in Pakistan, that has always strived to be a responsible member of global community. The regional development mosaic awaits its due fineness through an equal will and effort by the Indian side. While the precedent is least promising, both countries just cannot afford to let the stalemate in their bilateral relations continue. The key step is to amicably resolve their longstanding disputes, notably Kashmir. Dispute resolution by establishing a mechanism while channelizing the existing ones is a better choice than crisis management. This is easier said than done, but if taken, this road first demands strategic restraint and resumption of composite dialogue. Any future Indian misadventure earns a lesser likelihood of going scot-free.

Divergent to the frequently extended olive branches by the Pakistani side, the Indian conduct remains enfolded in a mist of uncertainty and spite, driven by pride and obstinance. The mantra of alleged terrorist attacks obscures any attempt of bridging divides and taking an inclusive step for development of the peoples of this region. The official statements that

mention attacking Pakistan could be enough for turning the tables, if compiled, sent to the UN Secretary General, and used as a legal evidence of an overt Indian threat to international peace and security.

There are fair signs that Pakistan's standpoint on terrorism would no longer be defensive and reactive. India has been oft-times exposed as the source of regional terrorism for the past five decades, supporting separatist movements inside Pakistan (BLA), Afghanistan (TTP), Sri Lanka (LTTE), China (Dalai Lama) and former East Pakistan (Mukti Bahini).

Risks are high and so is the obligation. It takes two to tango and would require many to carve out a better destiny for the region that hosts a huge chunk of world population. The onus of maintaining balance thus also lies on major external powers, so that any arms race is not stimulated in the Subcontinent.

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