



## **Feigning Ignorance: The Pakistani Way – From Uri to the Surgical Strike**

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The terrorist attack in Uri on September 18, 2016, which led to the death of 18 Indian defence personnel, brought India-Pakistan relations to a new low. There has been pressure from political parties as well as media-coerced public opinion to make a definitive response to such an attack. Especially after Pathankot and Gurdaspur, the attacks in the army base in Uri, and later the attacks in Pampore, was proof enough that terrorist groups function unabatedly within Pakistani territory, without any restriction, getting easy access to logistical support, funds and arms. Pakistan instead of making any attempts to curb terrorist groups, has allowed such groups to spread terrorism in Kashmir and other parts of India.

India has avoided using the military option, restraining itself, as per the political culture and tradition of the country, even when terrorists have entered the nation in guile. India has shown its political and strategic maturity in its response, not breaking away from its past political tradition of being a country which resorts to its military option, only when all other options have worn off, to defend itself territorially. However, there is no introspection on the part of the Pakistani leadership, who even reported that the Uri attack as well as such attacks was staged by the Indian intelligence to undermine Pakistan, denying that a surgical strike was carried out neutralizing terrorist elements that were hatching to infiltrate into Indian Territory. The alibis used by Pakistan to justify its terror promotion have come under international scrutiny. They fail to assess that Indian strikes were against terrorists and not against Pakistan or Pakistani Army, something that they seem to be fighting against as well.

The present developments took place in stages. First came the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist Burhad Wani, who had a cash reward of 10 lakhs for getting captured. It was followed by a sponsored ferment in the valley triggered by those who sympathized with terrorism and Wani, which led to major loss of lives in the valley, both amongst civilians and law

enforcement agencies. It was followed by the Uri terrorist attacks leading to the death of 18 Indian defence personnel. There was a general anticipation that during the United Nations General Assembly speech on September 21, 2016, Prime Minister Sharif will admonish India in the harshest of words. However, even after the Uri terror attacks and the Afghan vice-president's speech admonishing the role of Pakistan, which he delivered before PM Sharif, PM Sharif spoke at length about the human rights abuses in Jammu and Kashmir. Sharif cosmetically stressed that Pakistan's basic objective is to forge peace with India and having gone the extra mile to achieve this, he repeatedly offered a dialogue to address all outstanding issues. He comfortably feigned to acknowledge the role of Pakistan in nurturing terrorism within its territory, undermining terrorist attacks not only in Kashmir and other parts of India, but also in Afghanistan, and pleaded to resolve the Kashmir dispute, which according to him 'was a Pakistani objective evaluation', without making any mention of the issue of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and how it can be resolved. He made it clear that India's basic pre-requisite for discussion on the issue of terrorism in Kashmir and other parts of India from Pakistan remain 'unacceptable ... to engage in a dialogue'. He stated that slain Burhan Wani, a Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist, was a young leader and described him as part of a peaceful movement.

Wani himself in a video declared the number of people he killed, the way he intended to destroy the local government infrastructure in Kashmir, and his intentions of killing more.

Not even once did PM Sharif mention the challenges that he faces as a leader of the nation, where religious minorities are being attacked apart from the reports of Pakistani Human Rights Commission about the rising number of missing people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan provinces, the woes of the Pakistani people to even get potable water, the rising arms and human trafficking in the nation, and the growing drug menace that has turned into a major challenge in the rural and urban spaces of Pakistan.

Conveniently, ignoring the plight of the Pakistani masses, PM Sharif tried to draw attention to the alleged suffering of the people of Kashmir. While North Korea develops more nuclear warheads as 'a righteous self-defence measure' inter-alia through Pakistani technology and resources, PM Sharif nonchalantly spoke of Pakistan's long-standing pledge to disarmament and non-proliferation. This issue was also raised by Afghan Vice-President Sarwar Danesh tacitly when he referred to Pakistan's role in the North Korean nuclear program and the threat it poses to the region.<sup>1</sup>

The Pakistani government understood that the Uri terrorist attacks have significantly perturbed Indian decision makers, and they might opt for steps that would undermine Pakistan's Kashmir plan. The terrorist attacks in the Army base in Uri initially turned into a hub of misinformation, rhetoric and unverified statements. The reports covered on the lack of preparedness of the Indian Army leading to the loss of so many lives, the Pakistani media building up a conspiracy theory, the Indian media reporting a surgical strike being carried out inside Pakistan occupied Kashmir long before the real strikes were carried out and Pakistani media reporting the F-16 cover that is being provided on Islamabad in fear of an Indian attack on the capital, that built up a conundrum. There were media reports of forward deployment being carried out by Indian defence forces, Pakistan Air Force carrying out its 'Highmark' exercises at

this opportune moment building up forces in the Pakistan India borders near Jaisalmer, which even had an impact on the Karachi Stock exchange.

During this time, analysts and strategic planners opined objective prescriptions which the Indian government could follow. Ideas like not attending the forthcoming SAARC dialogue (which has been postponed following the withdrawal of India, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka from the Summit), making surgical strikes, breaking off diplomatic relations, suspending cross-border trade, having a naval blockade, scrapping the Indus Water Treaty and many more such options were being discussed amongst the intelligentsia as well as within the strategic community. But while such speculation was being framed, Indian defence personnel carried out a decisive surgical strike along the Line of Control in the early morning on September 29, 2016, eliminating seven terrorist launch pads, killing all terrorist elements who were planning to infiltrate into India from those launch pads. To avoid misinformation and miscommunication, the spokespersons of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of External Affairs conducted a joint press conference providing necessary information about the surgical strikes carried out. Pakistan immediately denied such a strike had been carried out, as accepting the strike would have forced them to acknowledge the existence of such launch pads, as well as required them to retaliate militarily to save their face from their domestic public wrath. For India, carrying out the surgical strike was an alternative counter terrorist option that also carried a strong message for the Pakistani leadership.

The Pakistani Foreign Office has been alleging that as Balochi insurgents are seeking asylum in India, it proves India's involvement in Balochi insurgency. Before making such allegations, they should introspect about the number of regional and international terrorist organisations functioning freely from Pakistan, having training camps, coordinating and orchestrating attacks from Pakistan.

Being in an age of easy information, some information remain restricted for strategic and security reasons, and that can be the reason why it has not been possible to divulge the composition of the surgical teams which carried out the surgical attacks, how they entered through the LoC, how many terrorists were killed, their bodies as evidence, the ammunition that was used, which has been sought for by many. It should be taken not of that no nations defence forces are bound to inform the general masses about their strategic positioning, or their strategic activities. If need be, they can provide more information regarding the operation, if the existing threat has been neutralised. Pakistani Army has carried out its well-advertised Operation Zarb-e-Azab, which carries out counter terrorist strikes within its own country. But neither have they come out with a White Paper nor did the people have the courage to challenge the federal government asking them to clarify how such operations were carried out with the minutest details.

The present situation raises multiple questions for Indian-decision makers.

- Is it the end of the Gujral doctrine? Will India start framing a separate Pakistan policy within South Asia?
- Should India consider giving asylum to Balochi leaders?

- Is abrogating or altering the Indus Water Treaty an option worth considering, which might be detrimental to India's relations with her other neighbours?
- If further terrorist attacks take place in retaliation to the surgical strike, what would be the reaction of India? Will it go ahead with further covert operations to eliminate terrorist camps across the LoC or would it search for other alternatives?
- Has the thresholds of tolerance in India been altered vis-à-vis Pakistan? If such change has taken place, what would be the implications of such change?
- The Indian and the Pakistani media, has a tendency to report flawed information. How long can both the governments react to public opinion created out of such flawed media analyses and reporting?
- If our intelligence has adequate knowledge of the various terror modules, infrastructure, financial channels, arms dealings of the terrorist organisations, functioning within Pakistan occupied Kashmir as well as in other areas of Pakistan, instead of handing it over to Pakistan, which sustains these groups, the evidence should be provided to all nations and regional and international platforms, like the US, Russia, France, UK, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and other players in the region, along with China, the UN, the EU, SCO, World Bank, IMF, BRICS, ASEAN, OIC, etc. on a periodical basis, till the international community is coerced to take a stand on Pakistan being a state that sponsors terrorism.
- Can a parallel forum of dialogue be strengthened with the Pakistani Army, which remains to be the key decision maker in foreign policy making?

Due to India's political tradition and culture, it is very unlikely, that India would opt for any action that will seriously undermine South Asia's peace and security. The surgical strike along the LoC was a targeted operation against seven specific terrorist launch pads and not an aggressive policy taken against any country. It should be also understood, that in the future, if such intelligence is acquired, such targeted operations might be repeated to thwart such blatant infiltration attempts. Indian intelligence and armed forces have shown their skill that they are apt in averting such terrorist attacks. But, there is a need to understand that fighting a proxy war with terrorists is a risky game, and there will be cases where such attacks will take place in the future. This is a phenomenon all throughout the world, including terror attacks in the US, France, Belgium or China and to counter such attacks there should be a worldwide condemnation against nations sponsoring terrorism and terrorists.

While strengthening the anti-Pakistan and anti-terrorist lobbies on every international forum, India should also start pointing out the various ailments that Pakistan hides from the international community such as the case of the missing people in Balochistan, the massive corruption that is taking place, the failure of the health, primary educational and sanitation infrastructure, its proliferation networks in arms and nuclear technologies, the rampant human rights abuse that is taking place against women, children and religious minorities in all the provinces as well as making special note on Gilgit and Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, its parallel economy that is sustained on drug, human and arms trafficking which feeds various terrorist and extremists groups. Also the role of the Pakistani intelligence in India and Afghanistan, the manner in which the government has been using the policy of nuclear blackmail against India, along with the façade of democracy.

While keeping dialogue as a major instrument of diplomacy during better times, while strengthening inter-departmental communication to shorten the response time, it should develop all other diplomatic avenues of coercion to counter Pakistan misinforming the international community about terrorism that they sponsor, about the terrorists they nurture, and the violence within Pakistan, which they want to shroud with the story of Kashmir that Pakistan wants to tell.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Statement by His Excellency Sarwar Danesh, Second Vice President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly, September 21, 2016, <http://afghanistan-un.org/2016/09/statement-by-his-excellency-sarwar-danesh-second-vice-president-of-islamic-republic-of-afghanistan-at-the-71st-session-of-the-un-general-assembly/>