
Pulwama aftermath: Cosmetic steps to avert punishment will not suffice to change Pakistani Military Establishment's entrenched pro-terrorism credentials

Pakistan's pronouncements and actions over the last fortnight have been an apposite reminder of the enduring wisdom in Abraham Lincoln's famous quote *"You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time"*. With the twin swords of an aggressive Indian intent and the likely blacklisting of the country by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in June on account of its sponsorship of terrorism hanging over its head, Pakistan sought to seek refuge in the slippery eyewash of a publicly announced, almost assuredly fleeting, herding-in of some of its India-focused terrorist assets in the hope that, as in the past, the passage of time would dissipate the concerted pressure that has been built upon it in the aftermath of the barbaric Pulwama terrorist attack of 14 February 2019. The problem with this approach, however, is that it is disingenuous and by no means novel. Pakistan has used it *ad nauseam* over the decades, admittedly with a certain degree of success. Weary of Pakistan's doublespeak and obstinate aversion to mending its terrorism-sponsoring ways, India, with the strong tailwind of the support of the international community on its back, has made its position abundantly clear that it would no longer accept anything short of conclusive, confirmable action by Pakistan against its terrorist assets.

Even the limited actions projected as having been taken recently by Pakistan against specific terrorist outfits, which are for all intents and purposes proxies created and nurtured by it, are merely symbolic. Developments in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) last week left little ambiguity about this. Even as Pakistan claimed that its security agencies had begun rounding up leaders and members of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), the UN-designated terrorist group responsible for the Pulwama attack, using another proxy, China, fought tooth and nail at the UNSC to prevent a United States (US) initiated and France and United Kingdom (UK) backed proposal to designate the JeM's leader, Masood Azhar, as a global terrorist. How Pakistan could attribute any seriousness to its claimed anti-terrorist action while indulging in such hypocrisy defies comprehension. No wonder then that India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Syed Akbaruddin, said, *"Terrorists are going to be ever more creative in finding ways to violate the rulebook. Also the unfortunate reality is that States who are apologists for terrorists will continue to provide alibis to justify their actions and inaction too, as was done by a serial offender (Pakistan) earlier today"*.

A recurrent feature of Pakistan's oft-repeated hoax of acting against India-focused terrorists consists of taking some members of the targeted terrorist organizations into custody. This part is well publicized, especially by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the publicity wing of the Pakistani Army. What action is then taken against these terrorists is, however, seldom known. Eventually, a few months (or years) down the line those that had been apprehended begin to come trickling back onto the terrorist scene, making vitriolic speeches or actually participating in violent attacks. For a country in which special military anti-terrorism courts hold expeditious secret trials, even of civilians, and routinely hand out the death penalty (over 300 death sentences have been passed in the last four years), much to the chagrin of the international community and human rights organizations, the immunity enjoyed by these India-focused terrorists tells its own morbid tale of State collusion.

In this backdrop, India's intent to use diplomacy as its primary tool, as has traditionally been the case, but also now lace it with the threat of physical force, as with the Balakot airstrikes, to compel Pakistan to stop encouraging terrorist attacks on its territory, has taken on a serious hue. The international community, barring China, too seems to have run out of patience with Pakistan, as recent developments at the UN show. As brought in [EFSAS Commentary of 15-03-2019](#), China has been blocking Azhar's designation for a decade, but has never faced the kind of sustained pressure and embarrassment on the issue in the UN as it is doing now. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went to the extent of commenting on China's attitude towards the designation of Azhar that *"The world cannot afford China's shameful hypocrisy toward Muslims. On one hand, China abuses more than a million Muslims at home, but on the other, it protects violent Islamic terrorist groups from sanctions at the UN"*. India's aggressive intent and the international community's present tenacity both indicate that Pakistan will not be allowed to continue to fool people anymore, and that it would be compelled to act against terror or face bitter consequences. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 28 March made this abundantly clear in an interview with the *Republic Bharat* TV channel in which he tore into Pakistan's double-standards and hypocrisy over cross-border terrorism emanating from its soil and added that India would no longer fall for Pakistan's false promises of *"decisive action"*.

Pakistani claims of recent action

Seasoned Pakistani writers with in-depth comprehension of the functioning of the Pakistani military establishment such as Ayesha Siddiqi, author of 'Military Inc: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy', predicted just a couple of days after the Pulwama attack that as Kashmir-bound terrorists were central to the establishment's planning, no action would be taken against the JeM despite the huge pressure after the Pulwama attack. Others anticipated cosmetic action on the same lines as earlier occasions when the establishment came under serious pressure. Security analyst Aoun Sahi said, *"A crackdown would not work if there is no plan to control the activities of these organizations. Arresting a few leaders won't help. These organizations need to be stopped from radicalizing society, especially the youth. We have seen several crackdowns against such organizations in the past 15 years or so. Let's hope this time they will make a serious effort"*.

Siddiqi was proved correct, with no action being taken till 5 March. The airstrikes by India on a JeM facility in Balakot, however, rattled Pakistan into taking the cosmetic action that the others had predicted. On 5 March, Pakistani security agencies took into *"preventive detention"* 44 leaders and members of terrorist organizations. These included Mufti Abdul Raouf and Hamad Azhar, the brother and son respectively of JeM leader Masood Azhar. Both had been named in the dossier on the Pulwama attack handed by India to Pakistan. The Pakistani Interior Ministry also released an updated list of 70 organizations proscribed under Schedule 1 of Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, which included Hafiz Saeed's Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), in addition to JeM. Further, the Pakistan government took over two JuD affiliated madrassas and property owned by FIF.

India reacted to these actions claimed by Pakistan by saying on 9 March that *"claims are being made that terrorist organizations will be proscribed, that some individuals have been placed in preventive detention and that some action has been taken against seminaries and madrassas belonging to terrorist groups. We are seeing the same script that has been played out earlier after the terrorist attacks on our Parliament in December 2001, the Mumbai terrorist attack in November 2008 and the attack on Pathankot airbase in January 2016"*.

The Pakistan government also notified the United Nations Security Council - UNSC (Freezing and Seizure) Order, 2019 in accordance with the provisions of the UNSC Act, 1948 (Act No. XIV of 1948).

This order was issued to meet FATF requirements on the implementation of designation of persons and entities under the UNSC resolutions. Pakistan is presently on FATF's grey list on account of the shortcomings in its counter-terrorism financing and anti-money laundering regimes. FATF has repeatedly warned Pakistan of the ramifications of letting terror groups operate in the country, and did so most recent in February at a FATF meeting in Paris soon after the Pulwama attack. Pakistan's Finance Secretary Arif Ahmed Khan disclosed that *"The FATF recommendations instruct action against the banned outfits. We can face economic sanctions if we don't implement FATF recommendations"*. FATF officials have specifically mentioned JeM, along with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), as well as their renamed successors groups, as terrorist groups Pakistan needed to take immediate action against. Pakistan needs to demonstrate adequate progress against these groups before the next FATF plenary which is due in June this year, or else it faces blacklisting and banking isolation, something its fragile and highly vulnerable economy can ill afford.

Pakistan's track-record of conscious inaction

In spite of the stifling censorship of the Pakistani military establishment, the more independent-minded sections of the Pakistani media have over the years pounced on the rare opportunities that have come their way to chastise the establishment for sponsoring terrorism and zealously protecting its terrorist assets. A recurring theme in such reporting has been the futility and absurdity of the superficial, shambolic, ephemeral and easily reversible steps that are repeatedly taken by the establishment to placate and distract the international community after each major attack by its terrorist proxies.

Writing on Masood Azhar, respected Pakistani author and journalist Zahid Hussain said on 2 February 2014, *"Breaking his long hibernation, Maulana Masood Azhar, a notorious militant leader in Pakistan, resurfaced last week when he addressed by phone thousands of his supporters in Muzaffarabad. This first public appearance of sorts in years of the leader of an outlawed organisation, Jaish-e-Mohammad, raises questions about the state's policy towards militancy... First Hafiz Saeed was made 'kosher' by being brought into the mainstream and now Masood Azhar is back in the arena. Indeed, the reactivation of leaders of the outlawed groups does not seem accidental. It is a disturbing development for the international community as well as for our national security. The resurfacing of Masood Azhar and other militant leaders exposes the duplicity of our policy on militancy. The country has paid dearly for using militancy as a tool of our regional policy in the past and it is high time that it is stopped"*. Two years later, after the terrorist attack carried out by the JeM against an Indian air base in Pathankot, Hussain was still asking the same questions when he wrote on 13 January 2016 that the *"oft-repeated cliché"* in Pakistan's official statements that *"We will not allow our soil to be used against any other country for terrorism"* had *"become a national embarrassment"*. He added that *"a solemn pledge loses all credibility when major militant attacks in other countries are allegedly traced back to our territory"*. He further wrote, *"What has lent credence to the skepticism of our commitment to act against all militant groups are the continued activities of many of our erstwhile jihadi assets despite the National Action Plan being operative for more than one year. It has been a long time since we outlawed those groups and claimed they have been rendered dysfunctional. But this has never happened. We were perhaps never really serious in enforcing the ban"*.

An editorial in the *Dawn*, a reputed Pakistani English language daily, on 14 January 2016 questioned why the JeM was *"still able to plan and execute such an audacious and sophisticated attack on the air force base?"*. It averred that *"The PMO (Prime Minister's Office) statement offers a clue — 'offices of JeM are also being traced and sealed' — but it is an inadequate explanation. Thirteen years after the group was banned by the state, why was it able to still operate offices that are only now being sealed?"*.

The editorial concluded that *“For too long, militant groups that have been banned by the State have simply changed their names or gone temporarily into hiding, only for them to reappear stronger and more resilient. In the case of JeM, the State’s failures have been exceptionally egregious. Until yesterday, when he was reportedly detained, Masood Azhar was a free man; other well-known leaders of the group apparently routinely roam the country preaching jihad... This time JeM, and others like it, must be fully and permanently dismantled”*.

That the situation has not changed till date is brought out in an article by Asad Hashim on 11 March 2019. He wrote that *“the JeM-run al-Noor mosque and seminary in the eastern city of Sialkot, for example, was sealed by police on Tuesday. Three years ago, the same facility was closed after JeM claimed responsibility for an attack on an Indian air base in Pathankot”*.

Specific to the JeM, the group carried out an attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001, which led to a long military standoff between India and Pakistan. In 2002, General Pervez Musharraf’s military regime declared the JeM a terrorist organization and arrested Masood Azhar. Despite such designation, the JeM continued to operate freely in Pakistan under the guidance of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and Azhar was soon back in the saddle ordering deadly attacks. After the Pathankot attack in 2016, Azhar was once again detained by Pakistani security forces and his brother Abdul Rauf Asghar reportedly took over JeM. Some assets of the group were also seized by the security forces. However, within a few months even this largely notional pressure was off the group once the international outrage over Pathankot had subsided.

From the above, it is crystal clear that it never ever was the intention of Pakistan to seriously take on its terrorist proxies, no matter how strong the international pressure or how far its attitude and actions detracted from the letter and spirit of the international anti-terrorism regime. So far, Pakistan has done nothing to demonstrate that its present publicly claimed post-Balakot resolve against the JeM and the LeT are in any measure or degree different from its earlier eyewash actions.

Present actions do not inspire confidence

The statements emanating from Pakistani authorities in the days following the Balakot air strikes held out the promise that decisive action would, finally, be taken against the JeM, the LeT and their ilk. Prime Minister Imran Khan said in an interview that *“We cannot take the stance any more where you have these armed groups in our country... We can’t afford being blamed for any terrorist activity, like Pulwama, like what happened”*. He claimed that he had ordered the most serious crackdown on terrorist groups in the country’s history. *“We’re already cracking down on them, we’re already dismantling the whole set-up. What is happening right now has never happened before in Pakistan”*.

The Imran Khan government is not the first one in Pakistan to grossly overestimate its own authority and clout to take on these terrorist outfits. The efforts in this direction of earlier civilian governments led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) had firmly been stonewalled by the military establishment in order to preserve its own cosy, incestuous relationship with these terrorist outfits. Pakistani journalist and author Ahmed Rashid described this on 8 June 2018 as the establishment’s *“long-running dependency on militants to sustain its foreign policy in the region”*.

India had on 27 February given Pakistan a dossier on the JeM’s involvement in the Pulwama attack, and had shared key excerpts of the dossier with important UN member countries. A few days after receiving the dossier, Pakistan’s Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Afridi said that *“we are analyzing it and we will take practical measures on the evidence provided... Pakistan won’t let its soil*

be used for militant attacks against any country". However, on 27 March the Pakistani Foreign Ministry issued a statement informing that the findings into the Pulwama attack had been shared with India and that Islamabad had sought *"further evidence and information to take forward the process of cooperation on the Pulwama attack"*. The statement also claimed that Pakistan had examined the *"22 pin locations of alleged (terrorist) training camps shared by India and said no such camps exist"*. This has been the traditional, weather-beaten Pakistani response to every earlier Indian demand for action after terror attacks, be it in 2001-02, in 2008 or in 2016. Despite volumes of additional evidence being presented to Pakistan by India on each occasion, the investigations were never carried through. Pakistan hid behind lame excuses, waiting the pressure out, and then returned to business as usual.

That is what India apprehends Pakistan is attempting again now, and the international community is in agreement. India, therefore, has been firm in its assertion that nothing short of *"verifiable, credible, visible and sustained"* action by Pakistan against terrorists, terrorist groups, their proxies and the terrorist infrastructure would be acceptable to it. India's Ministry of External Affairs said, *"India is disappointed at Pakistan's response to our detailed dossier on the Jaish-e-Mohammed's complicity in the cross-border terror attack in Pulwama, the presence of its terror camps and leadership in Pakistan"*. It added, *"We are hardly surprised, as this identical script was followed by Pakistan in the past, after the terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008 or in Pathankot in 2016. It is a well-known fact that the UN-designated terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammed and its leader Masood Azhar are based in Pakistan. This was again acknowledged recently to international media by Pakistan's Foreign Minister. There's no dearth of sufficient actionable information and evidence in Pakistan itself to take action against them, if there is sincerity and intent to do so"*.

Conclusion

A critical factor that is often overlooked while assessing Pakistan's absurd demand for more information from India is that the Pakistani military establishment should not, in reality, even require the first dossier to begin with. As evident from the reporting of prominent Pakistani journalists quoted above, it is no secret within Pakistan that terrorist groups such as JeM and LeT are veritable arms of the military establishment. They enjoy the patronage of the establishment, their fighters are trained by trainers with past or present linkages to the Pakistani military in camps set up with the establishment's active support, and they are tasked to launch attacks by the establishment. What information then, beyond what is already known to the establishment, could India, or any other country for that matter, provide Pakistan about the leaders, members, activities and camps of these outfits?

Pakistan has thus far got away with denial of its well-documented terrorist-happy ways on account of a number of complex reasons. The noose, though, is now tightening around its neck. The Balakot air strikes have serious connotations. In an atmosphere of a sharply reduced tolerance amongst Indians for terrorist attacks such as Pulwama, any future major terrorist attack by Pakistan-backed groups will almost certainly lead to immense pressure on the government of the day to hit the terrorists in Pakistan as hard, if not harder, than at Balakot. Pakistan's publicly and frequently articulated threat of nuclear retaliation having been proved by the Balakot strikes to be just bluster, illustrated that the cost on Pakistan for promoting India-directed terror has suddenly become much steeper.

The international community, woken into alertness by India's strong military and diplomatic response, and anxious to avert another India-Pakistan face-off, has also come across as much more resolved and dynamic in getting Pakistan to mend its ways. The recent event at the UN, where the US, France and the UK raised the ante by taking up the issue of Masood Azhar's designation in the open assembly,

much to the consternation of China, soon after the latter put a hold on the matter in the sanctions committee, clearly demonstrates this.

Pakistan has been pushed into a tight corner, and the only way out for it appears to be a conscious and genuine reversal of its policy of supporting terrorism. That would require decisiveness, and more meaningful and firm action than it appears to presently be willing to take against its terrorist proxies.

Perhaps introspection and recognition that the Pakistani military establishment and its terrorist underlings have, over the years, degenerated into a liability for their so called “*Kashmir*” cause may help.



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