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### **CAN INDIA CHANGE PAK'S OUTLOOK TO SUPPORTING TERROR GROUPS POST BALAKOTE?**

**BY**

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The Pulwama attack was responded to by an airstrike deep into Pakistan's Balakote where a terrorist training camp of Jaish existed. It was a successful airstrike, with no civilian or military casualties. Four to five existing structures were brought down. Reports of casualties vary however there were casualties is confirmed. Balakote also has an international interest, as reports indicate that terrorists trained there are despatched to Afghanistan and Kashmir.

The Pakistan air force was taken by surprise and could not react to the Indian incursion. Pak had never expected India to employ air power as it implies escalation, which they never contemplated. They were prepared for a ground offensive, akin to the surgical strike. Their entire focus remained the LoC.

Imran Khan in a multi-edited televised address, post Pulwama, directed at India, stated that India should not attempt any foolhardy action as Pak remains prepared to counter. Being a mouthpiece of their army, he added that Pak is willing to investigate the Pulwama suicide attack, provided India provides proof of the complicity of Pak groups. It was a means of deflecting Indian actions and gaining world sympathy as Pak sought peace and reconciliation.

Post the Indian airstrike, Pak was forced to admit that the Indian air force had crossed the LoC. This admission meant Pak had to retaliate, even if half hearted, to save face within the country. Hashtags on Pak social media and clamour by the opposition meant response. It did, launching a daylight strike, which was anyway foolhardy. It hoped that by employing a collection of 24 fighters, it could cause panic in India. Its aircraft were forced to retreat on observing just eight Indian fighters, dropping their payloads close to the border in army camps, without causing casualties.

In the ensuing dogfight, both nations lost an aircraft each, with Pak losing an F 16 to an Indian MIG 21 BISON and India losing the same MIG. However, it ended up capturing an Indian pilot, whom they returned within 3 days. Since Pak had targeted Indian posts, it left India with an option to escalate.

The Indian government has so far avoided further escalation as it has conveyed its desired message by the air strike, which was its intention. The Indian action has shaken not alone Pak, but also the international community. This suddenly led to intense pressure on Pak.

By striking deep into Pakistan, not POK, the message to the international community was India's willingness to escalate to the level it desires, unless they compel Pak to change its spots, despite a threat of a nuclear conflict. To Pakistan it was even more direct. The days of shallow ground strikes and condemning Pak's actions are over. The retaliation by India will be harder and deeper each time. Indian patience had run thin and it will ignore Pak's nuclear blackmail.

Pak is aware of its shortcomings in its conventional military capabilities, economy and international backing. It realised that it was at the receiving end of pressures, despite being militarily targeted by India. The sympathy it desired was missing. It also knew it could not afford a full-blown conflict as the nation's economy would crumble. It had gambled and lost.

With the ball in Pak's court and Indian threat looming, will Pak change? Will it reign in its jihadi elements? Has the Indian strike convinced the Pak military leadership on the futility of its present policy? These are issues which concern India.

The Pak army has only one enemy, India. Other than India, it battles home grown terrorists, created by its own folly. Its defence budget share of over 30% of government expenditure, its large military strength and power over the country needs to be justified to its populace. This is done by projecting Kashmir as rightfully theirs and India as the aggressor. Talks with India, leading to some form of resolution would impact the Pak army the maximum, hence would never be accepted.

Its Jihadi elements, nurtured over the years, imbibed with an anti-India venom cannot be curbed, restricted or prevented from carrying forth the message of vengeance at the drop of a hat. Doing so would compel them to turn against the state itself. This could add to its internal terror problems, presently led by the TTP. Its army, which has also been radicalised to a large extent cannot now be told to consider India differently.

Hence, there would be no change and talks would never resolve issues, unless the Pak army is convinced of its foolhardiness. The Pak army has created an internal image of being saviours and capable of meeting all challenges of national security. The image projects an invincible army. This is done through controlled media by hiding facts about casualties and only projecting successes. The result is that the army is revered and trusted. Unless this myth is broken, there would never be an opportunity for the polity to push the army into the background.

The army's control over the polity, foreign policies and media is too strong to be reduced in a short span. The army hiding the downing of an F 16 in the dogfight with India as also the loss of the pilot, the son of a senior serving air force officer and destruction of the terrorist camp at Balakote, details of which have begun to flow, indicates the nature of control it possesses. Pak twitter handles are projecting immense losses in POK due to Indian artillery shelling, post the return of the captured pilot, which has been ignored by their media, as their army does not desire its release.

While world pressure on Pak exists, earlier with its support to the Taliban and Al Qaeda and presently to the JeM and LeT, it would never be enough to compel it to change, considering its geo-political importance. The US requires its support for resolving Afghanistan, China employs Pak to counter Indian influence and has immense investments in the country and Russia also desires some influence over Afghanistan.

Military action would always have limitations. Any action short of war would be hidden and denied by the Pak army. Unless it is shamed nationally, nothing will change. This implies only the conduct of an all-out war, which considering the nuclear realm may not be justified.

The only means which could push Pak is application of international economic pressure. Its close allies, Saudi Arabia and UAE should be discouraged by the US from investing in Pak or providing it aid. China may provide some support however no nation pushes good money after bad. Its support would soon reduce. The IMF should provide aid with severe conditions including strict monitoring of its defence budget.

India's growing defence budget and enhanced capabilities would either compel Pak to follow suit or be prepared to accept more such actions, pushing it harder and harder. This would lead to an economic collapse in time.

Pak is aware that India would not hesitate to employ force and is willing to escalate, which would push the Pak military to respond with an effort which it cannot afford. Hence, while it has managed to save face till now by bulldozing its press and forcing its polity to avoid commenting, it may not be able to maintain this charade for long. An economically weak Pakistan, struggling to clear debts, a reduced defence budget and with bare minimum to survive could compel it to change tack.

If the economic element of power must be pushed forth, then it should be led by India's diplomatic power, convincing nations and multinationals from investing in Pak. The military threat must remain as an overhang. Pak will not change overnight, it cannot afford to. The change will be gradual and prolonged but become visible shortly. The Indian state is presently a powerhouse and needs to employ its complete power to push Pak down the economic drainpipe if it seeks to compel it to change.

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