

CHANGING NATURE OF MILITANCY AND ITS IMPACT

BY

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Background

A strong counter infiltration grid adopted by the Indian army and its willingness to hit hard against any Pak post supporting infiltration, has reduced infiltration levels in Kashmir. An approaching summer may bring forth increased attempts however each should be met with enhanced volume of fire, seeking to deter and eliminate. Internally, the rapid culling of foreign militants, which increased after the launch of operation 'AllOut' has reduced their numbers and impacted domination of Pak based militants in the valley.

Simultaneously there has been an increase in the number of local youth picking up weapons in the state. As per police reports, the figure of locals joining militant groups rose sharply in 2017 to 126, an increase from 88 in 2016. Prior to the elimination of Burhan Wani, the figures were negligible.

Present reports state of one youth joining militant groups every three days, the latest being an army jawan from Shopian, whose family has appealed to him to return home. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in surrenders, which may not be at the same level as those joining.

Increasing Local Militancy

Multiple reasons have been enunciated for increase in local ranks, the most evident being the honour and respect provided to eliminated militants during their burial. Whether this should continue is a mute question, as once any individual picks up a gun and challenges the authority of the state, he is an enemy of it and should therefore be buried as is done for foreign militants. This honour and respect provides those who are on the borderline the incentive to jump across and join militant ranks.

Local militants generally prefer operating close to their home bases, seeking security of the presence of local population. Most avoid being trapped during encounters, as though religiously motivated, are ill-trained and ill-equipped. Some of those who have joined are active while most remain poster boys, seeking to incite others, while themselves staying away in safety.

Impact of Government Policies

The state government has been moving softly on stone pelters who come out in large numbers to disrupt anti-militancy operations. In the recent incident in Kulgam, four civilians died in cross fire and security forces firing, attempting to prevent the army from launching its operations by resorting to stone pelting. Local militants who were trapped, escaped as the attention of security forces was diverted. The decision of the state government to withdraw charges against stone pelters has only encouraged them to continue their pelting.

There has also been an increase in civilian casualties due to militant related incidents. As per an MHA report, there was an increase of 166% in 2017 as compared to 2016, in figures it was 40 as compared to 16 in 2016.

Despite announcements and requests by all in the hierarchy in the state and security forces, locals continue to pour out to prevent security forces from succeeding in encounters. Interestingly, all casualties are subsequently claimed as innocents targeted by security forces. Thus, it emerges that local militants remain close to home and have immense support from their community.

Role of the Hurriyat

The Hurriyat continues to portray itself as the voice of the masses, though other than calling for strikes and bandhs, it has been unable to move forward. It has continued singing the same old song of self-determination, while rooting for joining Pak, solely on religious grounds, while knowing that it is impossible.

It is also aware that their kin across the border in POK remain second class citizens and would never be permitted to form an independent Kashmir, despite being called Azad Kashmir. They have ignored the words of wisdom of Farooq Abdullah, who has repeatedly stated that Kashmir can never survive alone as a nation. They have no control over militants and remain only a voice.

Changing Trend

With an increase in local youth joining militant ranks, there is an emerging trend in the militancy. In the coming days it would more likely be dominated by local militants, rather than Pak based. They would seek to attack soft targets and would prefer to hit and scoot rather than engage, unless trapped. The changing trend also indicates that many trapped would

be unwilling to surrender, even when surrounded. Surrender would imply being considered an insult from their own brethren.

The argument being forwarded by many is that increasing numbers of locals joining militancy is a dangerous trend, as a home-grown militancy remains a threat to the stability of the nation. However, if correctly evaluated it could become a game changer in multiple ways in the long term.

Militancy in other regions of the country have been resolved because in each case there was a leader of the dominant group who could be engaged in talks. In every case, it grew from a local level without a single dominant personality to when a leader emerged, after removing his opponents or reducing the viability of other groups in inter-group clashes.

There are multiple groups in play in the valley. Most groups operate under their Pak handlers, while the changing trend indicates that leaders at local level remain Kashmiri youth. No singular group or individual has yet to emerge, who represents the youth or possesses widespread support. Therefore, the Hurriyat remains dominant as it is unchallenged, and Pak continues to hold the cards.

With passage of time, if the army continues its relentless operations and enhances its counter-infiltration grid, inflow from Pak would reduce. Those few who do infiltrate would need to operate under local Kashmiri commanders, hence impacting direct influence from their Pak based handlers.

Without direct support from Pak, their desire to continue using the names of Pak based groups would begin to change and local groups with local demands would begin emerging. This would give rise to a regional character in the militancy in Kashmir, which for the state could be a positive signal, if correctly handled.

These groups would be regional based with local support as militants prefer being close to their home bases. Inter-group rivalry would increase, resulting in clashes for domination. Being militants wielding power and the gun, they would, akin to every other militancy across the globe become greedy, seeking more power and funds. Atrocities on resident population and enforcing their own brand of justice would increase, leading to their alienation.

Impact on Hurriyat and Pak

With the rise of local militancy, the Hurriyat would begin being marginalized. Its hold on the population would be taken over by militant leaders. If kept under check as is being done presently, they could soon become redundant and expendable.

For Pak, it would become a nightmarish scenario as their control and hold would reduce. They may continue aiming to provide diplomatic, financial and equipment support, but would be unable to directly influence the same. Tight monitoring of hawala and control over the border would reduce direct Pak support. Demands of militants would change from joining Pak to independence, akin to the militancy in the North East. From these regional groups would emerge leaders who would seek to guide the militancy and be the ones the state could consider engaging in dialogue.

Is it Feasible or Utopian?

The above scenario may presently appear utopian today, however, figures of increase in locals joining militancy, while reduction in infiltration is proving this emerging trend. Even Pak based militant groups are presently nominating local Kashmiri's as heads of respective organizations, knowing they hold the key. By enabling the Kashmir militancy to develop a local character, there is hope of emergence of leaders with whom negotiations can be considered.

Changing our Approach

The issue is whether we desire this situation and if we can exploit it to our own advantage. If a long-term approach is to be considered, then this is scenario would be better than militancy being dominated and controlled from across, with which we only battle, with no end in sight.

If we are to create this scenario then our emphasis must shift from counter-insurgency to counter-infiltration and active engagement of Pak posts supporting infiltration. We need to employ every means to blunt infiltration, even if we must enhance cross-border firing to destroy militant camps and Pak posts supporting them. Simultaneously, we need to reduce collateral damage resulting in fewer locals joining the group. The state needs to reconsider its policy of permitting burial of eliminated militants at home, reducing glamourizing militants.

Conclusion

While we continue to deplore Pak support to militancy as also increase in locals picking the gun, we need to look years ahead. We must remember that all militancy's were resolved only after protracted periods, none overnight. We have our own North East militancy's as examples. Therefore, we need to consider and plan for the same now, setting the ball rolling for the future. Every dark cloud has a silver lining and unless we spot it, we may miss the bus.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.