

The new dynamics of Kashmir struggle

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Over the last 17 months, Kashmiri armed struggle has received a number of serious setbacks particularly in terms of human losses. The Indian forces had successfully assassinated top leadership of various outfits. Hizbul Mujahideen operational commanders in particular have been the main targets of the Indian forces. Moreover, the Indian forces have killed around half a dozen commanders of other key outfits. Above all, largely recognised indigenous militant group Hizbul Mujahideen had to face a fourth split in its ranks that had definitely caused a dent in its military combat capabilities. While on the political front, a faction of APHC is unilaterally engaged in dialogue with New Delhi.

At the same time, New Delhi claims to have fenced 90 per cent of the 750 km long LoC. The Indian officials also claim that border fencing, which had paid dividends in East Punjab in the early 80s by reducing infiltration significantly, has now brought down similar activity down to 10 percent in J&K. Besides, Islamabad is still firmly adhering to its commitment of not allowing any militant activity across the LoC from its soil.

The Indian policy makers now believe that the worst is over and the armed struggle has been contained, weakened and finally would be crushed just like they did with the Khalistan insurgency. Moreover, New Delhi seems ready to continue with its 'waiting game' with regard to the Kashmir, hoping the opinion would finally switch in India's favour.

On the domestic front, India is quite happy that Mufti-led government is doing well and has improved Indian image in the international community at large. Secondly, there is a growing Indian perception that Islamabad cannot sustain the alleged proxy war in Kashmir in the long run owing to a host of reasons including international pressure, domestic instability and poor economic state of affairs.

An analysis of the data available reflects that India is gaining an upper hand in the protracted guerrilla war. But in the same course recent pro- and anti-election campaigns show that the public mood is very different and any reconciliation process between New Delhi and Srinagar is still a distant dream. A host of factors suggest that ground situation is quite volatile as portrayed by the Indian media and government officials.

During recently held elections, all contenders were trying to sell pro-Azadi agenda and slogans in their poll campaigns. The lost race was led by figures like sitting Chief Minister Mufti Sayeed and Farooq Abdullah. Even the likes of ruling PDP and NC demanded to include militants in the ongoing talks, particularly Hizbul Mujahideen, for a durable solution of the dispute. Such pronouncements by the pro-Indian camp are a very new phenomenon, signalling a significant development.

The Indian officials claim that freedom fighters do not have mass support but the big question arises as to how militants sustain themselves if they do not have local sanctuaries. As mentioned earlier, the funeral ceremonies of all recently killed commanders witnessed massive public attendance from all walks of life. At times, the funeral attendance crossed over the figure of 50,000, which sounds unbelievable given the dangerous security situation of the state. Even some pro-India political formations sent their condolence messages to grieved families. This came as shock for New Delhi that thought the militants had little public support.

Interestingly, many reports emanating from the Valley suggest that armed struggle has transformed into a more sophisticated form of guerrilla warfare with its character and outlook dramatically changing after the tragic events of 9/11. The militants have opted for more innovative ways to dodge the Indian forces. For instance on June 5, Indian Defence authorities revealed that freedom fighters were now utilising mobile services, emails, and SMS messaging services instead of wireless system, to strengthen their communication network. Similarly, the numbers of IED (an explosive device) blasts have registered a sharp increase. It is a clear indication that the freedom fighters have adopted advanced communication services to meet the challenge posed by the Indian army.

New Delhi has always been branding the Kashmiri freedom

fighters 'illiterate', 'fundamentalist', 'poor' and 'foot soldiers' in many ways. On the contrary many Indian and even independent sources now admit that a large number of the fighters are not only highly qualified but also professionally very sound. It is quite amazing that the first suicide bomber in Kashmir, Afaq Ahmad, was also a computer trainee from downtown Srinagar. Indian intelligence sources confess that the most disturbing change is that educated middleclass have begun to join the freedom fighters whose strikes are carefully planned, with the optimum use of modern technologies. Recently the BSF discovered that a fighter had installed web cameras outside his house to monitor passers-by.

Hardly a year ago, India termed the Kashmiri struggle as 'residual militancy', implying that it would end sooner than later. Now it is redrafting its reports and saying that the Kashmiri boys are re-joining the ranks of the separatists. Another new but noteworthy factor is the freedom fighters' outreach to new pockets of society. Over the last decade, only Ahle Hadees and Deobandi organisations dominated the armed struggle but Brelvis and Shia youth are now among the new entrants. Strangely enough, Srinagar-based newspapers report that women are gradually joining the armed struggle to play a pivotal role in sustaining the struggle.

There is no denying the fact that the freedom fighters' strike and penetration capabilities against the sensitive Indian defence installations are touching new heights of skill and bravado. In a recent operation 33 plus BSF personals were killed by detonating a landmine on a highway. Furthermore, last year militants successfully eliminated a high value target credited as father of the counter insurgency, militant-turned-politician Kukka Parray. Moreover, suicidal attacks have also become a regular phenomena in the resistance movement, thus making the Indian forces vulnerable on the one hand and demoralised on the other. Over the last three years, freedom fighters have invariably proven their strong military muscles.

Lamentably, the Indians still regard the Kashmiri uprising an outcome of unemployment and illiteracy and lay greater emphasis on job creation instead of addressing the genuine problem. Former chief minister Farooq Abdullah's decision to arrange government jobs for over 140,000 youth during his tenure could be just a small reflection of the pro-India mindset. To his complete shock, such an employment opportunity could not save Abdullah's National Conference party from being routed out in last state assembly elections. Moreover, resistance, alienation and unrest continue to cloud the skies of J&K. It is widely believed that the Kashmiri youth do not turn to the gun just because they cannot get jobs. If unemployment and financial frustrations are the reasons for anti-India sentiments in the youth, then how does one explain the 'fidayeen' attacks by some boys who belonged to extremely well-off families.

Currently, the Indian strategy to counter the armed struggle revolves around the diction of free hand. The *New York Review of Books* described this word in a very apt way in its recent comment on Kashmir situation. The paper says, "You heard the word very often in the valley, and it spoke, as nothing else did, of the breakdown of communications, the end of dialogue, and the unthinking preference for violence and terror."

All the tangible and intangible indicators reflect that despite many Indian claims, armed struggle remains an important factor of the Kashmiri political life until the dispute remains unsettled. Furthermore, Islamabad's deep-rooted desire for liberation of Kashmiri is a source of moral support for the struggle. Now, the big challenge before the Kashmiri leadership is to transform its violent struggle into a non-violent and peaceful one. There is a genuine desire to introduce new means and ways in the struggle to attract and cultivate international backing and seek global sympathy. All depends on New Delhi's gestures, a bit more breathing space and lesser heavy-handedness can open new vistas of opportunities not only for Kashmiris but also for India.

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