**Separating signal from noise**

* [Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)
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Can things get any worse in Occupied Kashmir? Yes. The principal responsibility of Pakistani decision-makers then is to ensure two outcomes at the same time.

The first is to try to ensure that things do not get any worse in Occupied Kashmir. The second is to try to make things better in Occupied Kashmir. In a world of almost unlimited noise, this simple starting principle is a valuable indicator of the decision-tree or risk matrix of the Pakistani leadership troika comprising the prime minister, the COAS, and the DG ISI.

Preventing a worsening of the situation in Occupied Kashmir requires a deft touch. It demands simultaneously the ability to project a cost for India if it chooses to continue its brutality in Kashmir, as well as demonstrating to India, the potential for constructive engagement, if it were to cease and desist from its brutality in Kashmir.

Making things better in Occupied Kashmir requires even more sophistication, and a small miracle. It demands the easing of the current asphyxiation of the Kashmiri people. But to sustain that also requires something that has not existed for nearly three decades: mutual confidence between Pakistan and India.

Complicating the Pakistani leadership’s decision-tree and its risk matrix is one disturbing but inescapable truth: India’s current brutality is wildly popular within India, and is largely neglected by India’s key strategic (US and France), economic (UAE and Saudi Arabia) and political (Bangladesh and Afghanistan) partners.

In short, India’s policy of sustaining its brutal occupation of Kashmir through murder and mayhem does not exact any serious political cost of Prime Minister Modi, and in fact, offers a domestic political premium. Consorting with PM Modi in this morally repugnant equation is an Indian intelligentsia and an Indian public discourse that seeks any and every opportunity to cheer on anything that is seen as even remotely popular. The Indian media is not merely aiding and abetting India’s brutal occupation of Kashmir; it is a driver of the process. For those naïve simpletons for whom fifth generation warfare (5GW) has been a punch line, the Indian mainstream media over the last three weeks (or last three years) should be a wake-up alarm with no snooze button.

The reason the Indian media is more than a relevant actor in this discussion is not because it makes for an obvious or easy target for Pakistani criticism. It is a relevant actor because in ordinary or traditional spheres, the mass media serves as a potential device through which audiences can be engaged and persuaded to a course different from the one they are on. Sadly, this is not a route that is open for Pakistani decision-makers.

Hatred for Pakistan, intolerance for Muslims, and brutality in Kashmir have been hard-wired into the Indian mass media and its general public (it is important here to remember that the Kargil fiasco of 1998-1999 and the 2008 Mumbai attacks helped to forge this hard-wiring). Regardless of how it has come about, this hard-wiring now represents a substantial challenge for those that seek, above all, to prevent a worsening of the situation in Occupied Kashmir, and make things better, if possible.

The absence of mutual confidence between India and Pakistan is deeply troubling because the three most recent events or trends that have diminished mutual confidence between the two countries have been initiated not by Pakistan, but in fact by India. In the past, the blame for reduced confidence was easily laid at Pakistan’s doorstep. India under PM Modi, has sought, I believe very deliberately and carefully, to alter this fundamental assumption about how the dynamic in South Asia is defined.

The combination of Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (India’s foreign minister) and Ajit Doval (India’s national security adviser) has produced a strategic critical path for India that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan will find very hard to wrestle with – unless it too is willing to explore ways and means of conducting its affairs that is far removed anything resembling business as usual.

India has deployed three offensive manoeuvres as part of this critical path this year, but all three were conceived and planned over several years. The first offensive manoeuvre was the Balakot strike. No matter that it was India that lost multiple aircraft (two by its own admission, including one Mig 21 fighter, and one Mi 17 helicopter), and India that initiated the cross-border aggression. The Balakot strike seemed almost to have been implicitly endorsed by Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and for whatever its worth, smaller countries like Australia too.

The second offensive manoeuvre was the August 5 revocation of the special status of Occupied Kashmir within the Indian Union. Despite the need to increase its already suffocating occupying forces presence by over 150,000 new soldiers, and despite having to incarcerate even those Kashmiri leaders that have traditionally been poodles for New Delhi, the enhanced brutality of the Indian occupation of Kashmir has survived over three weeks without any major disruptive domestic or international challenge to it.

The third offensive manoeuvre is the on-going full scale diplomatic war India is waging on Pakistan’s economy, by working closely with the authorities in France and several other Western powers, to ensure that Pakistan is blacklisted at the Financial Action Task Force. The FATF opening is a subset of the wider counterterrorism umbrella that India has used to great effect since September 11, and through the Nato/Isaf and US mission in Afghanistan, to reinforce Pakistan’s vulnerabilities on the issue of non-state actors that are accused of conducting politics through terrorism. The principal tool at India’s disposal in this regard is the UN Security Council Resolution 1267, as well as subsequent UNSC resolutions to the same effect.

If the Pakistani leadership’s main task is to prevent a worsening of the situation in Kashmir, whilst trying to ensure that it can get better, the range of options for Pakistani responses is limited – but it is not zero.

Pakistan’s initial diplomatic response to Article 370’s revocation has been exceptionally good, (although it has aspects of traditional thinking that must be challenged within closed doors). Working closely with China to secure a UNSC informal consultation on Kashmir was an important step. But small victories like these will wrongly offer an illusion of progress. Such illusions must be shattered. Pakistan’s diplomatic efforts need to be dialled up to ten, and then left there. The new normal is perma-crisis. The energy and effort levels must rise accordingly.

Thanks to the Hindutvadization of India, combined with the effects of the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, the public discourse in India has been lost. But the public discourse in the rest of the world is not.

Pakistan needs to invest in a serious rethink of how to position its national interests (investment, exports, tourism, and of course, Kashmiris’ right of self determination) in the eyes of the ordinary consumer in places like Jakarta, Amman, Dushanbe, Konya, Sao Paulo, Kyoto, Brisbane, Budapest and Manila. It must also explore how places like Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Helmand and Jalalabad – millions of whose sons and daughters called Pakistan home for many years – became so intolerant of Pakistan’s national interests.

The Pakistani leadership also needs to reflect carefully on whether the existing domestic environment is helpful or harmful to the national interest. From Larkana to Miramshah, and from Khuzdar to Raiwind, Pakistan is many colours, not all of which are palatable to all of us. Good leadership will find ways to work with all of them, not just the ones that supplicate to the current ruler.

Perhaps most important of all is to maintain focus on a single core operating principle of preventing a worsening of the situation in Occupied Kashmir. This means ‘do no harm’. Any event, even remotely traceable to Pakistan, that vitiates the atmosphere in Occupied Kashmir will signal the end of any effort to engage the public discourse in the rest of the world. Bravado and aggression will only undermine the cause.

Pakistan’s leadership must continue with the firm and peaceful path it has invested in thus far. Though it is being tested, the Pakistani leadership’s resolve must not waver: do not allow the enemies of peace – foreign or domestic – to goad Pakistan into aggression, rhetorical or otherwise.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.