
Kashmir: What Awaits in 2014

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Kashmir was some years ago perceived as an open and shut case where terrorism needed to be swamped and all would return to normal. That usually is a perception which prevails about most internal conflict situations when they are at the peak of conflict progression in terms of fighting and other military related activities. Solutions are seldom looked at comprehensively as militaries get self-obsessed with controlling the quantum of violence. Their goals usually remain limited to the subjugation of violence and creation of the much sought after threshold from where a political process can proceed. That can happen in internal conflicts which are stand-alone and where linkages are limited. In the case of Kashmir, it is questionable whether the conflict is internal in nature at all because of the deep-set proxy linkages which extend to our neighbourhood.

The situation has moved beyond even that as we find Kashmir now as a virtual vortex of an increasingly volatile regional and extra-regional strategic environment which needs a much deeper understanding. Analysts and thinkers with limited consciousness of the larger security considerations continue to treat it as a black and white situation in which an absence of violence is treated as return to normalcy. Unfortunately, it is this perception which has overridden the public mind about Kashmir and the Indian media continues to fan the same. Chief among the implications of this belief is the increasing demand to recognise that the role of the Army is over and it must return to the barracks to allow the people's domain to

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take over and the people's domain can only be handled by a civilian footprint. In many ways, it is being projected that the military footprint is now having a negative effect and coming in the way of restoring peace and integration.

The separatists and the radicals in Kashmir as well as the proxy supporters from across the Line of Control (LoC) are spurring this belief which is also finding the support of intellectuals and academia in India. Kashmir is at the crossroads of decision-making as to who should assume the prime role of finding peace. This crossroads has come at a very crucial juncture when the nation is going into a landmark national election, with every chance of change of the political dispensation in the new government. It is a year in which a second electoral battle is a few months away, for the State Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The security fallout of the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan continues to loom. The year 2014 is, therefore, a very crucial year for Kashmir and its future.

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In a comprehensive analyses on J&K, this examination commences with the external environment, thereafter moving into the national and then the local environment of the state. The local and internal dimensions tend to lose significance in comparison with the larger security issues revolving around Afghanistan, the politics of Islam and the role of Pakistan. It is, therefore, intended that this analysis commences with the internal dynamics and focusses on issues less discussed in fora outside Kashmir. It deliberately commences with drawing attention to the divide which exists within India between the informed and the ignorant. Kashmir is so isolated from the information map of India that except for a few who frequently travel to the Valley or officers of the Army and a few central services, very few ever get to know just what is happening there. In a state where over 30 English newspapers hit the stands every morning, there is hardly any penetration of the national print media. Information about Kashmir is, therefore,

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restricted to one-off news stories of negative events; it is difficult to have intellectual analyses about India's most serious security problem published in the national media unless they are topical and connected to a recent event. Such is the apathy that it is sometimes embarrassing to participate in discussions in Delhi's think-tanks and witness the type of perceptions that prevail.

A similar situation extends to the government where core competence to handle the state remains questionable from every angle and in every department. It appears information access to the environment in Kashmir remains challenged in the face of apathy and a will to get to grips with the perceptions prevailing in the Valley and adjoining areas. Discussions with Kashmiris in other parts of India are few and far between, and there is much reluctance on their part too, given the air of hostility. Events such as the Meerut incident become barometers of judgment and further lead to a clamp on free discussion. Social media, an excellent instrument to judge perception, gets mired in the positions held by the discussants and does not go beyond slander and insensitive mirth. In the year 2014, one of the major challenges before serious observers of the Kashmir situation is to get the information loop right and bring home the sensitivities of the situation.

Core Concerns about Internal Dynamics

What should worry observers is the continuous propensity to judge Kashmir from the presentation of statistics and a year on year approach without looking at the mid-and long-term strategy and end states. Where would we like to see Kashmir's internal health in the year of the Lord 2020, and where in 2030? No one ever asks this question and, therefore, no one ever gives a reply. The issue is all about the current state of the internal conflict and recognition of where we are. Any strategic analyst will correctly judge that currently Kashmir is moving somewhere near mid-way in the conflict stabilisation stage. This is a result of the military situation being largely under control, with the overall

security space firmly occupied by the security forces. To take it beyond the mid-way point of conflict stabilisation is the tricky issue; the Army can only handle the periphery while the core is managed by the civilian leadership and agencies.

The efforts by the Army in the civilian domain will nudge the pointer forward while well thought out initiatives by the civil agencies in cooperation with the political leadership can bring about a quantum leap. The two, however, need to go hand in hand. This is not a situation which dictates

individual approaches with different perceptions and it is not one in which any one agency has primacy. Unfortunately, many perceive the Army's space translating into it being restricted to the LoC to manage the 'border belt' in terms of counter-infiltration, sanctity and security of the LoC. This is limited and blinkered thinking because in a border state and a troubled one at that, the Army has to be prepared as much for conventional operations as for Low Intensity Conflict Operations (LICO) and that means having control over its logistics and movement space, besides a host of local resources.

The issue of alienation of the population is a live one. Most casual discussions about Kashmir harp upon the anti-national feelings which existed in yesteryears; stories of "*Aap Hindustan se aye ho*" comprise the most common refrain of people who wish to condemn the Kashmiris as ungrateful. Such conversations in India have remained in a time warp, seldom moving to an understanding that the situation has actually worsened. A small mercy in that the pro-Pakistan space has wilted even faster than the anti-India one has increased but the space which has really expanded is the pro-radical one. The speed of India's economic progress through the first decade of the millennium ensured that issues such as Kashmiri alienation remained ignored. In 25 years of internal conflict

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sponsored by an adversary who is focussed on the long-term, it is easy for unconcerned populations to forget that a whole new 'conflict-based generation' has grown up in Kashmir; one which has not witnessed the classic freedom of democratic society and has been repeatedly subjected to the midnight knock, military and police check points as part of everyday travel, and many times, racial abuse which is abhorrent but a reality-based phenomenon of internal conflict.

While social and medical organisations have undertaken a fair degree of research into the social dimension of the effects of the internal conflict in Kashmir, these are rarely discussed in security related seminars. The social domain is, thus, pushed into the hands of clerics. A report in *Rising Kashmir*, the much respected English daily of the Valley, speaks of the existence of over 60,000 drug addicts and 120,000 cases of depression in the Valley alone. This was recently discussed by the Mutahida Muslim UIema, an amalgam of religious scholars. If the nation is really concerned about the integration of Kashmir with mainstream India, it is the social domain which must not fall into faith and religion, but must remain the concern of the state. Little wonder, therefore, that the new generation of Kashmiris have little faith in the state and have withdrawn into the religious realm under the tutelage of extremist ideology which scoffs at India's secular credentials, encourages separatism and promotes trans-national religious links.

It doesn't help the national cause either when young Kashmiris' underambitious and well intentioned schemes of skill development and scholarships are not taken to the last step to ensure their safety, security and social integration as they gingerly step out of the Valley. Ghettoised into hostels or not finding residential accommodation because of various stigmas and mindsets, they continue to be trained but not educated

at universities outside Kashmir. Without sounding condescending about the Army's ability to execute schemes with completed staff work, the state needs to take into consideration how an Army experiment to find young Kashmiris placement in smaller cities was seen through by ensuring an outreach to even neighbourhoods in mainland India, taking ownership of every young person who had left the Jawahar Tunnel behind and ventured into the big bad world. Such scholarship schemes, which are essential, must be thought through as part of the integrative process of Kashmir, with sensitisation of the host environment and understanding with the local state and district authorities to avoid incidents such as the one at Meerut.

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The onset of radicalism in the Valley may be overlooked at considerable risk to the situation so painstakingly created by the security forces. Two reasons are responsible for this phenomenon. First, the emergence of political Islam as a worldwide phenomenon and the inability of the world to find an answer on how to counter it. The failure of the Arab Spring and the increasing violent standoff between the two major sects of Islam – Shias and Sunnis—is bringing to the fore greater cementing of radical belief related to individual sects; this is primarily to defend their respective turfs. In a networked world beset with increasing social media outreach, it is difficult not to get radicalised, especially if you perceive your own society on a descent and experience the turbulence of conflict. Secondly, Armies/security forces can seldom perceive the second and third order effects of the concept of operations they follow at the beginning of a counter-insurgency campaign. In such situations, as a rule, hard power has to be exercised to counter the large strength of anti-national elements and to exercise control. The effect on the population which suffers excesses is deep-seated antipathy. Each event multiplies the negative effect. The

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normal course of events and some instigated ones in the last eighteen months or so have seen reminders of the past – Kunan Poshpora, Pathribal, Machil, unmarked graves issue and, of course, the Afzal Guru hanging, have all been effectively exploited by inimical elements to remind the population about injustice and the inability of Kashmiris to find a place as integrated elements of Indian society. Invoking radical beliefs in such an environment cements negative sub-nationalism and helps resist the perceived perpetrators of injustice. This is why the feelings of *Azadi* run far deeper today than the pro-Pakistan leanings of the pre-1989 period.

In a vitiated environment stoked by emotions of the past and the vulnerability of the Kashmiri psyche to the manipulations of the separatists, it is easy to generate alienation. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1990) is a victim of these attempts and has now become the symbol of civil society all over India to slander the Army's human rights record. It is actually surprising that since the last five years or so, little research has been done on the AFSPA or alternatives. Even basic investigation of the law would have revealed that it was enacted for specific purposes recognised by the Parliament of India, extending to the restoration of order, respect for the symbols of national authority and the return of minorities (Kashmiri Pandits). None of these appeared to have been factored in the discussions which, anyway, have been only too few. The perception of the law being 'draconian' in content seems to have permeated civil society of all hues and it is going to be difficult for the Army to find ways of holding on to it in its current format. 2014 is the year in which there is need for debate on new legal provisions for empowering the Army to operate without reference to the civil authority, and legal protection of soldiers in the event of genuine mistakes. As we witness the transformation of the situation from public order to law and order, inimical elements are likely to get emboldened to set up 'legal traps' for the Army and create triggers for unrest. The Supreme Court's 'Do's and Don'ts' which are

clipped to AFSPA have never seen the light of day in the public domain and the media has almost never referred to them. These are akin to a demarche for the Army to operate within constraints and the Army has been abiding by the same. It is the Pathribal case mainly which is the spoiler, in perception and in effect. While the Supreme Court has given sanction to the Army to prosecute the alleged culprits, the lack of sufficient evidence and the incongruence between the Army and the J&K Police has led to the impasse. This case and Kunan Poshpora will continue to trouble the Kashmiri psyche and always provide ammunition to the separatists and radicals alike. Overcoming their negative long-term impact can only be possible with a complete turnaround in the methodology of functioning by the Army; this is unlikely given the circumstances. Yet, 2014 can be the beginning of a fresh approach which needs the integration of the Army and the state government.

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It is a strange phenomenon that after defeating terrorists (not terrorism), the instruments of power and agencies responsible for the overall security of J&K cannot come to a common understanding on where our future interests lie and how this needs to be pursued. It will be a major challenge for the new government which will need to ensure that a positive environment of development and social empowerment is created with full accountability. The outreach of the Army needs to be exploited and its organisational capability taken on board. In a campaign which is to be national in composition and outlook, there must be no exclusion of stakeholders who have given Kashmir its current stability and have the means to assist in the development agenda. Prevailing perceptions about the ‘conflict based economy’ need to be examined and corrupt practices rooted out to allow the development agenda to reach the people.

There is a host of other issues which need to be examined from the angle of being potential triggers. For example, a major drive needs to be launched for the integration of ‘surrendered terrorists’ and their

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families, with the stigma of their title being removed in all future references. In order to build trust, calculated risks will need to be taken, including the eventual drawdown of AFSPA in its current format. If the Army has to continue a proactive role in the building of the social environment, it will need to review its entire ethos of functioning and build bridges with the state government to have a common perception of the way forward.

Continuity, with frequent review of the concept of engagement and operations will need to be carried out.

The central government on its part must ensure a constituted body with sufficient resources and power to oversee the internal perception within Kashmir and the rest of India. Its task must be to counter propaganda and help take the population to a higher level of psychological integration through a well formulated perception management policy at the national level which must include elements of the Kashmiri media. If it is understood that there can be no resolution of the Kashmir issue with Pakistan in the short or middle term, it also needs to be realised that without internal strengthening of the integrative process, India will always remain at a position of disadvantage. The integrative process must take into account the return of the Kashmiri Pandits to their homeland in the Valley. This should be considered a barometer of success of the integrative process but must include the creation of a conducive environment to allow the Kashmiris Pandits to live without fear and without the necessity of overt security. While the local population speaks of tolerance and brotherhood, its test will be the creation of such an environment. It would help if the State Assembly were to adopt a resolution in this regard and look for ways of restoring the properties, dignity and self-esteem of the Kashmiri Pandits.

External Linkages

2014 is a watershed year in many ways. The external environment is getting vitiated due to the uncertainty about the future of Afghanistan and the ability of the Afghan National Army to withstand the Taliban's

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pressure in the face of reduced ISAF presence. This uncertainty is further increased by the apparent dilution of US interests in the Middle East and the tottering process of engagement with Iran. Post the events in Ukraine, the US is possibly seeking to resume its interest in the Middle East to offset the dilution of its relations with Saudi Arabia and seek greater control over the expanding arm of the radicals. President Obama's recent visit to Saudi Arabia signifies a turnaround in US policy and resumption of greater interest in the region. This remains the outer periphery of events which have only indirect implications for Kashmir. However, all these impact Pakistan which is in the throes of internal instability. Pakistan has continued interests in Kashmir albeit with a lower priority; its higher priority being given to the internal situation and to the emerging dynamics in Afghanistan which it must influence sufficiently to retain its hold on what it perceives as its strategic space.

Yet, this has not quieted the radical groups or the ISI which continue to look for opportunities in Kashmir. It is important for Pakistan that the internal turbulence in Kashmir which it had the capability to calibrate, is not allowed to drop below a threshold from where it will allow India to effectively play out the integration agenda. 2014, is therefore, a threshold year for Pakistan to ensure that it retains the capability it has painstakingly built. It may, thus, be expected that the low priority accorded to Kashmir is reviewed from time to time in conjunction with the radical groups. We may expect that following such reviews, there will be attempts to regain the space in Kashmir, with temporary reallocation of priorities. *Fedayeen* actions of the type witnessed at Samba and Kathua in recent months would possibly be launched alongside activation of the

LoC and major breaches of the ceasefire to keep Kashmir significant in the eyes of the international community. A new central government in New Delhi may either take some time to grasp the import of 2014 or be rashly brazen in response; either way suits the radical groups to keep Kashmir in focus.

Can Pakistan and the radical groups afford to allow the infiltration into the Valley to dwindle? Since the foot soldiers are few and far between and a high profile terrorist leadership is non-existent at present, it is imperative for the United Jihad Council to remain relevant to the cause of Kashmir. The summer of 2014 is, therefore, likely to see enhanced efforts at filling the Valley with terrorists and instigating street turbulence through exploitation of supposedly innocuous triggers. Memories of the Amarnath Shrine Board agitation of 2008 need to be recalled to realise the potential of unrealised triggers. The upcoming Assembly elections in the later part of 2014 will probably offer greater potential for exploitation if infiltration through the year succeeds. The Army has to be watchful and not be misled or diverted by ceasefire violations along the LoC.

The watershed content and scope of 2014 needs to be kept within India's control, through a watchful eye over the escalation dynamics. It is not a year of concessions and retribution for any misadventure on the LoC on the part of Pakistan and the radical groups must be swift and militarily effective. Events at the LoC, if any, must not impact our internal initiatives to stabilise the environment which must continue unhindered.