

The Situation in Jammu and Kashmir: The Way Forward*

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Introduction

Lieutenant General PK Singh, Director USI, Mr Anil Goswami, the Chair, ladies and gentlemen, I thank USI for providing me this opportunity and privilege to speak to such an informed audience. I will not talk about any final solution to the J&K problem. I think we are very far from that and therefore, there is no point theorising too much at this juncture. What I will talk about are the steps which could bring stability to the State. I will also describe the current situation, viewed from a historical perspective, as looking at incidents in isolation leads to quick-fix solutions at the expense of the holistic picture.

Historical Perspective

I spent a long time in Northern Command; first as a Corps Commander and then as an Army Commander. These were difficult and challenging times. But as I look back, all these challenges fade in comparison to the initial brunt of insurgency that was faced by the officers and men when it all started. The insurgency broke out in J&K in early 1990; thousands of people came out on streets, BSF had to resort to firing and a large number of protestors were killed; thousands of people crossed over to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) for training, and at that time there was a feeling among the locals in Kashmir Valley that freedom was just around the corner. 19 Jan 1990, the day Shri Jagmohan took over as the Governor of J&K, was the same night that thousands of Kashmiri Pandits fled the Valley.

However, by about 1993, when it appeared that the situation was improving, we saw direct intervention by Pakistan. The United

*This is an edited text of the talk delivered by Lieutenant General DS Hooda, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM and Bar (Retd), former GOC-in-C Northern Command, on the subject "The Situation in J&K : The Way Forward" on 11 Jan 2017 at USI, with Shri Anil Goswami, IAS (Retd) former Home Secretary of India in the Chair.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLVII, No. 607, January-March 2017.

Jihad Council was formed by Pakistan Army in 1994; Hizbul Mujahideen became more prominent as a pro-Pakistan group in comparison to Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which was pro-freedom.

1993 also saw violence spread to South of Pir Panjal. The first Hindu massacre in Kishtwar took place in 1993, and this trend of killing of Hindu population in the Jammu Region continued over the next decade. By 1995, insurgency had spread throughout the Jammu Region.

Intensification of Insurgency

During the period between 1993 and 1996, on an average, one thousand civilians and a similar number of militants were killed each year. This was the scale of insurgency at that time. To fight this, additional formations of the Army were inducted into J&K. Raising of Rashtriya Rifles (RR) battalions started, and in mid-1990s two force headquarters were raised: Victor Force in the Valley and Delta Force for Doda Region. We found that with the induction of these additional forces, the situation had started stabilising; though violence was still high.

1999 saw the Kargil War. At that time the whole focus of the Northern Command shifted towards this theatre. Large number of regular formations that were involved in counter-insurgency in the hinterland were moved into the Ladakh and Kargil area. So, while we won the Kargil War, the insurgency and violence intensified during the years 2000 and 2001. According to South Asian Terrorism portal figures, there were a total of 4517 casualties in 2001 (1067 civilians, 600 security personnel, 2850 terrorists).

Decline in Insurgency

After 2001, we saw a decline in violence. Additional RR Forces were raised: Kilo Force and Romeo Force; coordination with police and CRPF became better and so did the intelligence. There were also other factors that led to the improvement in security situation. One was the construction of Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System, commonly known as LC fence. The construction of the fence started in 2003 and this greatly contributed towards reduction in the number of infiltrators that were able to successfully sneak into J&K. Second and a lesser known fact is, that around this time

there was a section of local Muslim population - the Gujjars and Bakarwals, who turned against the militants in the areas of Poonch and Rajouri. This had a salutary effect. In my opinion, their contribution is unheralded, but I think it was extremely important. We saw evidence of this in Hill Kaka operations in 2003, where local support and guidance contributed to the success of the operations. There were a number of Muslims who returned from Saudi Arabia as they felt that their families were being harassed by foreign militants. We had the first all-women Village Defence Committee among the Muslims which was raised around the areas of Hill Kaka.

Hereon, we saw a very steady downward curve in militancy and violence. In 2007, total casualties including civilians, security forces and militants went below 1000 for the first time. 2008, 2009 and 2010 were the three years of massive protests but as far as militancy was concerned, the downward trend continued. 2012, can in some ways, be described as the best year as far as security forces were concerned. The total casualties including security forces, civilians and terrorists were 117, which in percentage terms was 2.5 per cent of the peak levels. The casualty figures in 2016 would be somewhere around 6 per cent of the peak levels. So, in my opinion when we look at data, we should look at it from a historical perspective and see how the security situation has improved.

Escalation by Pakistan

In my assessment, it was in 2013, when militancy was at its lowest, that Pakistan decided to ratchet up the situation. It was also linked to the elections that took place in Pakistan in 2013. Prior to the elections, Mr. Nawaz Sharif had been issuing positive statements about relations with India, growing economic cooperation and how would things get better between the two countries. This did not suit the Pak military. Some of you may say this is mere speculation, but let us look at the facts as they unfolded in 2013. The year started with the mutilation of an Indian soldier, which led to tension on the borders. Elections took place in May in Pakistan and soon after the results in June, we saw an escalation in ceasefire violations along the LC. In June, eight Indian soldiers were killed in an attack at Hyderpora. In August, five soldiers were killed in an ambush on the LC. September 2013 saw the first attack from

across the IB sector since 2008, and thereafter there was a steady increase in the number of incidents of infiltrators attacking police or army camps along the National Highway (Hiranagar, Janglot, Dinanagar, Pathankot etc.). There was an activation of the Jammu Region and ceasefire violations which were 62 in 2011, had jumped to 347 in 2013 and to 583 in 2014.

Internal Situation in J&K

September 2014 saw massive floods in Kashmir followed by a change of government in early 2015. Both these events had the potential for genuine outreach to the local population, but unfortunately a certain amount of mismanagement led to dissatisfaction among the locals. 2014-15 onwards, recruitment of militants from the local population was on the rise. Since more local recruitment was taking place, the casualties, particularly in South Kashmir, were largely of local youth who had joined militancy. They were poorly trained, poorly equipped and some were killed within just a few days of joining the militant outfits. This was breeding resentment among the local population, and during operations in South Kashmir, we would find locals turning out in protests, with women leading protests in a number of instances. It was also the time when tactics of the terrorists changed and there was a clear trend of targeting security forces, convoys and camps. In our assessment, groups were coming in from Pakistan tasked for this specific role.

2016 started with the attack in Pathankot, followed by Uri and Nagrota. There were surgical strikes into POK and the huge protests that broke out on 08 July after Burhan Wani was killed. Everyone in the audience is very familiar with these incidents so I am not going to dwell on these in detail.

The Way Forward

Where do we go from here? In my opinion there are two centres of gravity: One is Pakistan's support to proxy war, and second is the population. I mention Pak support to proxy war because if we look at the insurgency as only an internal issue, we are going to go wrong in our assessment. It is mostly financed, armed and supported from across the border in Pakistan. It is a transnational insurgency. To say that it is purely internal is Pakistan's narrative. Therefore, we need to give a more serious thought to choking

Pakistan's support to this proxy war. A few things need to be done on priority are :-

(a) There has to be an effective sealing of borders; as they say 'the best offence is a good fence'. Some have argued that a fence would lead to a defensive mindset but in my opinion, we do not have an option. As I said earlier, most major incidents that have taken place in last two-three years have been by groups that have directly infiltrated from across the border. Work has already started along the IB and LC where we are putting up a new and smart fence.

(b) It needs no emphasis that we need to enhance the security of our bases and make them more difficult to target. I know we have received criticism on this and this criticism is justified to some extent. However, some of the solutions being suggested are only partial. It would be incorrect to say that these incidents are due to laxity and lethargy of soldiers, non-adherence to SOPs, lack of motivation among the soldiers etc. and that by addressing these, base security would become fine. There are limits to how much can you ask from a soldier. We have to put in place proper physical and electronic security measures. We need a comprehensive plan for protection of our bases and garrisons. For that, procedures need to be fast tracked, funds allocated and bureaucratic procedures cut through. It is important for us to do this otherwise the nation will look at the Army and say that if we can't protect our own garrisons how are we going to protect the country.

(c) We need to choke funding and finances that are coming in from Pakistan. I am afraid very little action has taken place in this regard. We know money is coming into terrorist groups by means of hawala and fake currency. Demonetisation may have had some impact, but this whole issue needs to be addressed at in greater detail.

(d) Diplomatic measures to pressurize Pakistan need to be stepped up. At every forum, Pakistan rakes up the issue and accuses India of human rights violation in J&K. We also need to do more.

(e) Lastly, as far as borders are concerned, we must have an unpredictable military response. I am afraid the CBMs along the LC are not working. We cannot have Pak Army

firing at us on the borders, attack us, ambush us and carry out mutilation of our soldiers. We need to get unpredictable as far as our response is concerned.

The second centre of gravity is the population. This is much more complex. We tend to look at things from a security perspective and sometimes miss out the problems that are troubling the people. As far as our overall military strategy is concerned, I think it has been very good and we don't need to tweak it too much. Even during the protests that took place, respect was shown to the Army by the locals. There was a massive outreach programme that was undertaken by the Army and it was successful only because the local population had a fair amount of faith in the military. However, there are some facts that we have to consider. These are :-

- (a) The local youth is upset. 70 per cent of the population in J&K today is below 31 years of age and the insurgency is now in its 27th year; so 70 per cent of the population has grown up in this environment and seen nothing but conflict. This conflict has affected every facet of their lives, be it social norms, education, livelihoods etc. We need to engage with the youth and address their fears and aspirations.
- (b) Hurriyat is exploiting the fear of an identity crisis in Kashmir. Most protests are provoked on the basis that the Kashmiri identity is under threat, and this is a fairly emotive issue with Kashmiris.
- (c) There is a need to create more jobs within J&K. Let us take, for instance, the UDAAN initiative by which the Government sponsors some industries to train and hire young people. We found that these youth would come back to J&K after a few months. I think there is potential within J&K to generate enough jobs in the fields of tourism, horticulture, handicrafts etc. There is definitely a need for the local youth to move out to other parts of the country, but at the same time it is important to create jobs and businesses within the State.
- (d) We need to seriously look at countering radicalisation and also deradicalising those who have already joined the militant outfits. We must also make significant efforts towards rehabilitation of returned terrorists.

(e) Development is another important aspect as it can bring about an improvement in lifestyles. However, there is a feeling that everything is going to the Valley and other areas are being neglected. We also need to look at Ladakh and Jammu. The locals of Jammu have a genuine concern - now when the militancy is at its lowest why isn't the development taking place? Take Reasi district for example, at one time it was a hotbed of militancy, today it is considered a militancy free district; but it still remains one of the most backward districts of J&K. These are genuine concerns.

(f) I think a more mature political handling of the situation is required. J&K has a major dependence on the Centre both economically and politically. Even during protests in 2016, people were looking at the Centre for resolution and not really at the State government.

(g) The government narrative has to be strengthened. There is a lot of negative campaigning being done by Pakistan. Post July 2016, we saw a huge social media campaign being orchestrated from Pakistan. We are slow to respond and don't have a well thought out strategy.

(h) I think we need to widen our outreach to include all sections of society. We only talk to State politicians, Hurriyat and government officials; we need to engage with more civil society groups, like students, academicians, traders etc.

(j) My last piece of advice is to Hurriyat – don't involve Pakistan in the resolution of internal issues. It complicates everything. There are talks that are taking place at the diplomatic level with Pakistan and let it be restricted to that. Pakistan is only muddying the waters by its interference. Only the Indian State can find resolution to problems of employment, development etc and not Pakistan.

I will close here by saying that there are no simple solutions and I think there are no early solutions also. We have to take a consistent and long term view and then follow it through. Sometimes individual events generate so much heat and distractions that we tend to lose sight of the bigger picture and start to look for quick fix solutions. That is counterproductive to developing long term strategy. My advice to all the current practitioners in J&K is that we need a very clear head and a very strong heart.