



CASS Webinar

“The Recent Kashmir Crisis: Are Pakistan-India Heading towards a Military Conflict?”

May 18, 2020

Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS) organized an international webinar titled “The Recent Kashmir Crisis: Are Pakistan-India Heading towards a Military Conflict?” on May 18, 2020. The event was organized to discuss growing tension along the Line of Control (LoC) and its potential to end up into a serious military escalation between the two nuclear-armed neighbours in South Asia. President CASS ACM Kaleem Saadat (Retd) Chaired the session and Dr Adil Sultan, Director CASS was the moderator. Other panelists included: Dr Toby Dalton from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), Washington D.C., Air Vice Marshal Shahzad Chaudhry (Retd) and Dr. Rabia Akhtar from the University of Lahore.

Summary of the Proceedings

Dr Toby Dalton- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Dr Toby Dalton started his talk by sharing limitation of observing evolving situation from afar and possibility of missing out some ground realities as he hadn't had a chance to visit South Asia for quite some time. Looking back at the Pulwama/ Balakot crisis, Dr Dalton expressed his interest in the developing political narrative crafted by India and Pakistan to explain those events and to foreshadow how a future crisis might unfold. He stressed that his interpretation of the crisis was heavily influenced by his book “Not War, Not Peace” co-authored with George Perkovich from CEIP. He acknowledged that neither Uri surgical strike nor Balakot airstrikes of 2019 rose to the level of violence that they had imagined in their analysis in the book as none of these led to the

threat of use of nuclear weapons. He added that both of those activities by India - Uri and Balakot surgical strikes, were calibrated mainly for domestic political purposes and not for substantial military effects or even longer-term deterrent effect. They did not fundamentally change the structure of situation between India and Pakistan. With these preliminary remarks, he moved on to offer three points about the “new normal” debate, that was taking place in both the countries.

First, he argued that the use of air force by both countries was a new element. In his view, it crossed an ideational as well as military threshold. He also mentioned the role of luck in defusing the tensions. He further added that the crisis didn't escalate further mainly because escalation didn't serve the political interests of both the parties whereas de-escalation helped both the leaders to declare victory. Secondly, Dr Toby emphasized that “new normal” was a very loaded term and warfare or expectation of warfare should not be normalized in any sense. Having said that, crafting of this new narrative was meant to suggest a new paradigm, hinting that the future events in South Asia would be more violent with more punitive attacks by India on Pakistani targets, presumably in response to some provocation; such as a terrorist attack attributed to the groups based in Pakistan. He noted that Pakistan’s diplomatic thrust had remained focused on raising international awareness of the potential for further Indian aggression under the rubric of this new normal but that didn’t happen, suggesting that there were no structural changes in the parameters of the problem. He added that by looking at the intensifying cross border shellings, it seems that they are back to the old normal, instead of a new one.

Thirdly, Dr Toby stated that the new normal narrative was rather distracting as it has brought more focus on Modi as an individual, instead of India as an entity/ country; and that conflation was problematic. He seemed to understand fear in Pakistan that Modi's success in implementing majoritarian domestic politics coupled with a fairly tepid international condemnation of his actions in Kashmir specifically and against the Indian Muslims in general, would embolden him to try something more against Pakistan. Referring to aggressive Indian statements against Pakistan he said that it had animated Pakistan’s security community and had added to their anxieties. Without giving a verdict on the merit of those anxieties and also agreeing that the perceptions did matter, he stressed that as an analyst, he would also focus on the big picture. In this case, Modi’s domestic politics and actions were important details but they did not change

the big picture. His explanation of the big picture suggested that despite threats of attack, nuclear weapons would deter any changes to territorial status quo as neither country seemed to have the capability to win a war decisively. He added that these structural conditions had not changed despite change in the character of the Indian leadership. He concluded by saying that perhaps in this new normal debate, the “New” part may be new, but the “Normal” part was not much different from the old normal. There might be periodic violence but by and large, that violence was relatively stable and both states, in his view, knew how to handle that.

Responding to a question whether and how Washington was currently viewing regional situation and what would be Washington's likely response in case Pakistan or India escalated to unexpected levels, Dr Toby stated that the current US administration was largely fixated on COVID-19 and the upcoming elections and had very little time for foreign affairs, unless it had to do with blaming China for the COVID spread. Even Iranian issue wasn't gaining much attention, which otherwise always loomed large in the US foreign policy debates. Hence, he doubted current Kashmir crisis getting much attention as there was dearth of senior officials as well who might engage in next crisis effectively. He added that Indo-US strategic partnership had garnered more support for the Indian narrative and it resulted in some statements in its favor that weren't helpful in managing 2019 Balakot crisis. He stressed that improved Pakistan-US relations might lead to a better handling of any future crisis. To a question on China's pronounced role during Pulwama/ Balakot crisis, Dr Dalton maintained that China's role in that crisis was a puzzle in Washington's strategic community as well and there were no definitive answers to that as yet.

Air Vice Marshal Shahzad Chaudhry (Retd)

AVM Shahzad Chaudhry's presentation largely focused on three issues that included Indian actions in Kashmir, their potential consequences and the role of the international community with respect to the recent Kashmir crisis. He initiated by outlining initial steps that the Modi government had taken after coming back to power, such as the revocation of Article 370, allowing construction of Ram Mandir in place of Babari Mosque and introduction of uniform civil code. He also discussed Muslim persecution through Citizen Amendments Bill (CAB) and National Register of Citizens (NRC).

The speaker pointed out that India continued its atrocities in Kashmir with impunity that remained isolated from the rest of the world. Furthermore, India also went into a near war with Pakistan, which in his view was meant to scare Pakistan into submission. Revocation of Article 35A, he added, had even greater significance as it gave Indian state the power to identify who was a Kashmiri or otherwise. It allowed increased movement of the outsiders in and out of the disputed territory leading to an investment in property and paving way for geographic engineering. Talking about the entities which have aided the Indian government in its criminal acts, the speaker highlighted that the Supreme Court of India had kept quiet on India's revocation of Article 370. Similarly, the domestic public in India did not have the appetite to challenge the unfair decision making by the Indian forces, and to a certain degree supported this narrative. Furthermore, the international community was also silent on India's actions which emboldened Modi and Amit Shah to go ahead with their agenda. Consequently, BJP's Hindutva and Kashmir agenda continued to rage unabated.

Analyzing the consequences of India's criminal acts, the speaker asserted that the crimes committed by the Hindutva regime could bring about two outcomes: First, social pushback in the form of protests from the Muslim students; and secondly, a potential push back in Kashmir in the wake of the oppression. Moreover, the speaker also highlighted the prospective conflation of the two scenarios, noting that both the Kashmiris and the Indian Muslims had to face the oppression from the Indian authorities.

In such a scenario, AVM Shahzad was of the view that India might react in four possible ways; first, diversionary tactics such as Balakot like enactment, surgical strikes and LoC violation; Second possibility was "Battle of Reverse Front" involving terror attacks against Pakistan from Afghanistan and the Iranian territory, which he thought was already happening as India enjoyed space both in Iran and Afghanistan. Third, 'Offensive- Defense,' which he explained was much like Balakot situation and fourth was Defensive-Offensive that may involve an attack on Gilgit Baltistan. Expanding upon defensive-offence scenario, he argued that there were three directions from where India could potentially launch an attack against Pakistan i.e. North, East and South. In his view, Pakistan must focus more on the Northside.

In reference to the response of the international community to a new crisis, AVM Shahzad maintained that during Balakot crisis the international community intervened only when it was escalating. He warned that geopolitical and geographical spread of events might entail different responses. For example, if India did an offensive in Gilgit-Baltistan and at the same time something happened in the South China Sea; Chinese response would be different as it would focus more in the South China Sea. He did not anticipate that the COVID-19 would slow down or stop security issues as many security operations remained active even during the pandemic despite the United Nation's appeal to cease hostilities e.g. U.S. INDO-PACOM operation in Venezuela and the ongoing Yemen war, etc. AVM Shahzad concluded his remarks by recapping four aspects of potential Indian offensive, the first two, in his considered view, had already been employed by India with the possibility of employing the third that could eventually escalate to the fourth. He warned that such a situation would be very unnerving for the world.

On the questions regarding China's role in pacifying India-Pakistan crisis, he noted that it had a more pronounced role during Pulwama/ Balakot crisis. He explained that active support from China would depend upon its vested interests e.g. China would come forward if CPEC was under threat. Answering a question regarding Pakistan's likely response in the light of four scenarios mentioned by the speaker, AVM Shahzad Chaudhry responded that Pakistan had to look what its prime interests were. He stressed that Pakistan must defend itself forcefully against any level of threat. Responding to another question inquiring why the international community did not buy narrative of the Kashmiri struggle to be an indigenous one, AVM Shahzad responded that Pakistan had made certain mistakes and it was important to rectify those mistakes. He also pointed out that over the past decade, Pakistan's policy had been remarkable and would have an impact in the future.

Dr Rabia Akhtar- University of Lahore

At the outset, Dr Rabia Akhtar stated that there was no such thing as the new normal and the developing situation was in fact a continuation of the developments of the past decade and that will continue in the post-COVID-19 world. Referring to Dr Dalton's seminal book and other scholarly work on the subject, she added that it had become fashionable to talk about Pakistan as if it was an abnormal state and everything related to Pakistan needed to be normalized. She

emphasized that the so-called surgical strike by India, terming it “India’s experiment” was a gradual dilution of grand Indian strategic limits pushing to provoke a response. Surgical strikes post Uri and Balakot as well as the latest provocative statements by the Indian Defense Minister to take Gilgit Baltistan and AJK were indicative of India shedding strategic balance, i.e. the impressions of a status quo power and increasingly becoming a revisionist state. She ruled out the possibility of reduction of risks and Indian war mongering amidst COVID-19 and emphasized that the pandemic did not change Indian behaviour in Indian occupied Kashmir and Indian atrocities continued unhindered. The pandemic didn’t even stop the Indians from entering into a fist fight with Chinese border patrol forces. She termed it a diversionary phase of the war and added that there have been three thousand deaths from COVID-19 in India but it didn’t stop their former Army Chief and the Union Minister V.K Singh from making a statement that India’s plan to take GB is ready. She warned that it would not be too far-fetched to think that while Pakistan was dealing with COVID-19 crises, India might consider mimicking what China did to India in 1962 i.e. destroy Pakistan’s posts across the line of control, capture some part of its territory across LoC and then do a unilateral cease-fire just short of Pakistan exploring its retaliatory options. She emphasized that fear of escalation at the LoC was real even during the pandemic and any limited war might not remain limited. Hence, Pakistan should not even think that India would not attack in consideration of Pakistan’s pandemic challenge.

Dr Rabia further warned against the growing impact of Hindutva ideology on the Indian decision-makers. She described Hindutva ideology as exclusionary in its approach, discriminatory in nature and fascist in spirit. She ruled out any possibility of dialogue as the Hindutva leadership of India would not even want to engage with Pakistan; instead it would want Pakistan to internalize the change of status and accept the unconstitutional and illegal decision of August 5th imposed on people of Jammu and Kashmir. Any future dialogue, if at all, would require Pakistan to accept the current status of Jammu and Kashmir because from there onwards only this could be the new parameter that Pakistan would not accept.

The speaker added that Pakistan’s policy of ‘Quid Pro Quo Plus’ (QPQ-Plus) was a manifestation of Pakistan’s full spectrum deterrence and it did not imply that Pakistan would escalate disproportionately. The burden of escalation will remain on India, and the battle will be

determined by the targets and territories that India would opt to engage with military force in crisis. She further emphasized that the window for conventional conflict at the operational and tactical level will always exist and India will continue to exploit that to achieve its doctrinal objectives. The preparations of Pakistan military at the operational and tactical level will thus determine how quickly this window is shut as strategic deterrence remain intact. In any future crisis, previous statements by the Indian leaders regarding NFU, AJK and GB were going to play on the minds of Pakistani decision-makers. She insinuated that in any next crises between India and Pakistan, the outcome of the crisis would be determined by the level of resolve exhibited by their respective leaders. Given the high stakes and commitment traps involved, it may not be difficult to manipulate those risks of nuclear dangers. Moreover the balance of resolve, she believed, induced caution in a sense that each side believed that if restraint was not matched by restraint, the other side had no reason to maintain such a policy. So, while there were concerns that both India and Pakistan can feel confident in playing rounds of escalation safely; the fear that either side may escalate was a deterrent in itself for any further escalation.

Finally, she noted that Indian domestic reality would not change in any future crisis. India needed to understand that the nature of insurgency in Kashmir had changed since the time it began. She explained the difference between the symbolic Kashmir and strategic Kashmir. Borrowing Professor PR Chari's terminology, Dr Rabia explained that from 1990s onwards until the death of Burhan Wani in 2016, the symbolic Kashmir and the strategic Kashmir remained two separate entities. The death of Burhan Wani blurred the lines between these two Kashmirs. She cautioned that even Pakistan was not yet fully cognizant of that transformation taking place. She added that it would not change Indian domestic reality.

During the discussion session, while responding to a question on possibility of potential US role in persuading India to reverse its August 5, 2019 action and revive the dialogue process disrupted in 2007, Dr Rabia ruled out any such a possibility as there was no base over which India could be persuaded. She maintained that the Indian narrative of Kashmir being its internal matter was prevailing and due to COVID-19 situation and exacerbating China-US rivalry, Indian stature would only increase, making Kashmir issue more redundant.

In response to a question if Pakistan had taken into account the changing ideology and temperament of young Kashmiri generation while assessing its future policy options and also if that would impact Pakistan's traditional restraint, Dr Rabia agreed that young Kashmiri generation was looking towards Pakistan for support as the international community had largely failed them. She emphasized that Pakistan needed to have a clarity in its thoughts as to what we wanted, and to think through available policy options. Commenting on Pakistan's restraint, she commented that Pakistan's nuclear deterrence worked for its own defense, it did not cover eight million detained Kashmiris in IOK. In her considered view, there was no kinetic solution to Kashmir problem.

Closing Remarks by President CASS

In his closing remarks President CASS thanked all the panellists and the guests for their participation and said that in the last seven decades we have not had a peaceful stretch in Pakistan India relations. This is not because Pakistan did not need or want peace but because India wouldn't let it! Praising the three eminent speakers, he said that while the whole world is drowning due to Covid 19, India still finds the opportunity, vision, and reasons to indulge in threatening rhetoric to create additional problems as if it did not already have enough of its own.

President CASS said that the internal Indian electoral politics have held the SAARC region hostage where it has not been able to attain its potential trade linkages nor regional integration which could have brought prosperity all around. Megalomania and arrogance has become the hallmark of Indian policy in the region. While in the past it refused to discuss Kashmir and insisted only on cross-border terrorism, now it refuses to talk at all. The consequence of this is that there is needless expense on arms purchases while the citizens of the region are mired in poverty and misery.

The Chair of the webinar also added that the annexation of Kashmir in August 2019 and Citizens Amendment Act have launched India into a very ambitious but dangerous misadventure. Their hubris has led them to daydreaming where their military analysts think that they can walk into Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan at will, but they ignore that Indian occupied Kashmir is not yet under their control and is under extended curfew while Azad Kashmir has a

representative elected government. They believe foolishly that after making Muslim citizens, outcasts in their own country, they can entice Muslims of Azad Kashmir to opt to join India. They are on a path to become a bigoted, majoritarian Hindu state, where minorities have no rights or security. The bamboo wielding RSS adherents and other citizens are now being asked to join the armed forces for a three- year duration. This is to expand and intensify the nationalistic fervour and pressurise and marginalise the minorities.

In the regard ACM Saadat raised some relevant questions: What cannot be understood is why all this? How can humans be so cruel to other humans. How can humanity harbour so much of hatred for the other? Why the world is callous towards the plight of victims of crime against humanity?

While concluding the proceedings, President CASS said that the speakers today made important points and gave their perspectives. It remains for us to show the resolve to stand up to this madness and not be browbeaten by crazy analysts across the border. They keep touting the idea of Akhand Bharat by distorting history. When partition of British India took place there were 562 princely states across its length and breadth. India was a region and not a country. Most of those princely states were amalgamated into the Indian Union by force, in contravention of the Partition agreement. Kashmir was one that they couldn't at that time, has been the cause of constant conflicting claims between Pakistan and India. So, the world waits for two possible outcomes: one disintegration of India as we know it or a pogrom to exterminate 210 million Muslims there? I wonder which one it would be and what would the world welcome. When any of the scenarios materialises, the historian will ask: was it necessary? The answer to that question would surely be a definitive NO!

Key Takeaways

- The foreign observers face a limitation in accurately observing the crises situation in South Asia and they may not have a clear understanding of the ground realities.
- Pulwama/ Balakot crisis did not fundamentally change the structure of the problem between India and Pakistan.
- The use of air force by India and Pakistan during Pulwama/ Balakot crisis crossed ideational as well as military thresholds.
- Element of luck was instrumental in defusing the tensions during and after Balakot strikes.
- Warfare or expectation of warfare should not be normalized by using the terms like “new normal” to explain the security events.
- Notwithstanding Pakistan’s anxieties vis-à-vis Modi regime’s aggressive posture against Pakistan, it was important to keep focus on the big picture in South Asia where nuclear weapons were a reality and would not allow any change in territorial status quo.
- The current Kashmir crisis might not get attention of the incumbent US Administration, which is fixated on dealing with COVID-19 situation and the upcoming election, and had very little time for foreign affairs.
- In view of strengthening Indo-US partnership, Pakistan should focus on improving its bilateral relations with the US.
- Modi’s action of August 5, 2019 had complete backing of the Indian government machinery and received little or no condemnation internationally. The internal momentum for protest was also pushed back due to COVID-19 situation.
- Geopolitical and geographical spread of events would impact the involvement of external powers and entail different response at any given time. For example, China would actively support Pakistan only if China’s vested interests, such as CPEC, were under direct threat.
- COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to slow down or stop global security issues as many security operations remained active even during the pandemic despite the United Nation’s appeal to cease hostilities.

- There was no such thing as the new normal, the developing situation was a continuation of the developments of the past decade and it will continue in the post COVID-19 world as well.
- India's belligerent action and statements were a manifestation that India had become a revisionist state and any future dialogue offer from India would require Pakistan to accept the current status of Jammu and Kashmir.
- Pakistan's policy of 'Quid Pro Quo Plus' (QPQ-Plus) was a manifestation of Pakistan's full spectrum deterrence, and it did not imply that Pakistan would escalate disproportionately.
- Window for conventional conflict at the operational and tactical level will always exist and India will continue to exploit that to achieve its doctrinal objectives.
- Exhibiting a greater resolve will determine the outcome of any future crisis between Pakistan and India and fear of escalation would act as a deterrent.
- Pakistan must accept and recognize that the death of Burhan Wani had blurred the lines between the symbolic Kashmir and strategic Kashmir. In the absence of any material support from Pakistan, the Indian Kashmiris would have to fight their own battles.