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Indian Electoral Politics: Unpacking India's Pre-Poll Dynamics & Implications for the Region

Analysis Report



Indian
Chronicles

ANI

Hold Pakistan accountable for the ongoing turmoil in Kashmir: Member of European Parliament

Published Oct14, 2020

ET THE ECONOMIC TIMES

European Parliamentian suggests international community to hold Pak Responsible for Kashmir turmoil and its genesis

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PRESIDENT

Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd)

COORDINATOR

Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd)

DEPUTY DIRECTOR PUBLICATIONS

Sarah Siddiq Aneel

REPORT COMPILATION

Asad Ullah Khan

RAPPORTEURS

Shaza Arif, Zahra Niazi, Bakhtawar Iftikhar, Ujala Siddiq,

Javaria Nisar & Etfa K Mirza

REPORT TITLE

Hira Mumtaz

Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies

✉ cass.thinkers@casstt.com

☎ +92 051 5405011

f [cass.thinkers](https://www.facebook.com/cass.thinkers)

in Centre for Aerospace
& Security Studies

@ [cassthinkers](https://www.instagram.com/cassthinkers)

🐦 [@CassThinkers](https://twitter.com/CassThinkers)

Old Airport Road, Islamabad, Pakistan

www.casstt.com

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INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Islamabad, has maintained a tradition of initiating timely, well-informed and policy relevant debate on major national and regional issues related to national security, through conferences, seminars, webinars, guest lectures and publications by leading diplomats, practitioners, academics, and senior civil and military officers. These policy debates are closely followed not only by policy experts, relevant institutions, academia and media but also by the international community.

In order to analyse the upcoming Indian General Elections in 2024, CASS organised a seminar titled '*Indian Electoral Politics: Unpacking India's Pre-Poll Dynamics & Implications for Region*' in September 2023. Given previous Indian designs, it is anticipated that New Delhi, with an objective to gain domestic mileage, would play the 'security card' directed against Pakistan. The main thrust of Indian onslaught is expected to be on three key fronts: diplomacy, media, and military. This creates a significant challenge to Pakistan's security which needs timely and swift response.

The key aspects which were covered during this seminar included the following:

- Indian Electoral Politics: Implications for Diplomacy and Options for Pakistan
- Indian Electoral Politics: Military Implications and Options for Pakistan
- Indian Electoral Politics and Media: Options for Pakistan

The speakers included Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, Pakistan's Former High Commissioner to India; Air Marshal Waseem ud Din, HI(M), SBt (Retd), Former Director, Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Islamabad, Pakistan; and Dr Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal, Assistant Professor, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. The *Concluding Remarks* were delivered by Air Marshal Ashfaque Arain (Retd), Advisor CASS, and *Vote of Thanks* was given by Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd), Advisor on Aviation to the Caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan; and President CASS. Air Marshal Farooq Habib, HI(M) (Retd), Senior Director at the Centre, organised and moderated the seminar.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The next General Elections in India are planned in April-May 2024. Going by the past practices, the BJP government is expected to draw domestic political mileage by playing the security card. Pakistan is likely to be the target of Indian diplomatic and media onslaught. India is also expected to venture into a limited military operation to up the ante and incite anti-Pakistan sentiments which can be effectively translated into the BJP's electoral gains. Recent provocative statements by Indian leaders, notably by the Defence Minister are prelude to such actions. This seminar aimed to discuss the challenges to regional security in the wake of Indian actions in the diplomatic, media and military domains during the run-up to the elections.

The moderator Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd), Senior Director at CASS, in his opening address set the stage for the proceedings and highlighted the challenges Pakistan historically faced due to its proximity to India, accentuated by her hegemonic aspirations. He argued that the BJP's unbridled ambition to win elections has emerged as the most significant factor in India's relationship with Pakistan as it invariably counts on invoking anti-Pakistan sentiments domestically to gain electoral victory. He cited past incidents, including the Mumbai attack and the Pulwama, as examples where such strategies provoked anti-Pakistan feelings benefitting incumbent Indian governments. He also commented on recent belligerent remarks from Indian leaders and warned of potential escalatory measures in diplomatic, media and military spheres. While stressing the need for timely response he argued that Pakistan's response must be reflective of the past experiences, current realities and future contingencies.

Speaking on '*Indian Electoral Politics: Implications for Diplomacy and Options for Pakistan*', Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi discussed Prime Minister Modi's anticipated approach towards the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, while agreeing that he would certainly leverage the security narrative against Pakistan. Ambassador Qazi noted past instances where Pakistan was blamed for attacks in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJ&K) region, predicting that such tactics were likely to be amplified in the run-up to the elections. He further predicted attempts by India to exploit internal issues in regions like Gilgit-Baltistan. Reflecting on global reactions, he highlighted the lack of support from the Western political and security community for Pakistan, particularly post-Pulwama, Balakot, and the annexation of IIOJ&K, attributing it to India's burgeoning reputation as an ascending global power. Delineating Pakistan's strategic options, Ambassador Qazi argued that proactive diplomacy alone would not be sufficient to counter Indian escalations. He contended that international apathy to India's alleged exploitation of the security narrative for electoral mileage would persist unless Pakistan focused on internal governance reforms.

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din (Retd) discussed the complex dynamics of the India-Pakistan relationship, emphasising the potential risks and outcomes of a false flag operation by India. Drawing lessons from the past and considering India's strategic

outlook, he warned that it may undertake a false flag operation from a terrorist attack on a military installation to a violent act targeting civilians. In the wake of such an incident, he anticipated an Indian media onslaught and a coercive diplomatic campaign. He firmly stated that non-retaliation was not an option for Pakistan. Highlighting the role of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), he expressed confidence in its capabilities and readiness to counter any aggressive Indian move. He further underscored the importance of a combined tri-services approach for an effective response. At the national level, he called for a proactive strategy reiterating political unity, economic revival, and national cohesion.

Dr Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal shed light on the proliferation of Hindu nationalist themes via television, Bollywood, and diverse media outlets. According to him, the recurring theme of anti-Pakistan sentiment had become a prominent tool for mobilisation in India. He presented insights into the strategic use of war hysteria against Pakistan around major electoral periods. Dr Afzal proposed that Pakistan should adopt a proactive stance, while asserting its non-negotiable position as a sovereign nation, not merely an 'electoral pawn.' He emphasised the imperative role of the Pakistani media in unveiling the electoral stratagems of India to the global community.

In his Concluding Remarks, Air Marshal Ashfaq Arain (Retd) was of the view that India's economic strength and international support contrasted sharply with Pakistan's current economic and political vulnerabilities. This disparity benefitted the BJP's agenda, leading to state-managed incidents, punitive actions, and misinformation campaigns.

"The best strategy for Pakistan is to avert, respond, and put our house in order."

Delivering the Vote of Thanks, Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd) expressed satisfaction that CASS, through such seminars, continued to foster informed discussions on pressing issues, equipping stakeholders with the knowledge and strategies needed for a peaceful and prosperous future for Pakistan and its neighbours.

The seminar was attended by a diverse group of individuals, including academics, retired Armed Forces officers, policymakers, researchers, as well as media professionals; and concluded with an interactive Q&A session.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The current Indian Government appears on a usual course of involving Pakistan in its domestic electoral politics. The main areas where Indian active involvement is expected include diplomacy, media, and military. Indian actions could present a significant security challenge for Pakistan, which is already confronting serious internal issues; thus, making it more difficult to respond effectively towards these threats.
- By creating diplomatic pressure in the longer run, India may aim to compel Pakistan to either recognise the territorial status quo in the IIOJK; discontinue its practice of raising the issue at the United Nations; propose Indo-Pak talks by keeping the IIOJ&K issue aside; enter into a 'No War Pact'; or even to begin dismantling its nuclear arsenals and loosening its diplomatic ties with China by abandoning the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
- The Western political and security community did not support Pakistan in the aftermath of Balakot. Nor did it support Pakistan after India's illegal annexation of Indian Occupied Kashmir even though the brutalities of Indian forces were highlighted by many international forums. This was mainly because of Pakistan's unfavourable image in contrast to India's image as an emerging regional power.
- India's multipronged diplomatic strategy includes blaming Pakistan for promoting terrorism; creating an environment to win the war of narratives; projecting Pakistan as a terrorism sponsoring state; and winning international support for state-managed false flag operations in their own territory in order to initiate cross-border military operations.
- The sabre rattling and aggressive posturing by Indian political, military and the RSS leadership against Pakistan is increasingly becoming offensive and in sync with the ideologically motivated expansionary idea of 'Akhand Bharat.' In this context, there is a delusion on the Indian side of undoing the Partition, taking over Gilgit-Baltistan and dismantling Pakistan using military force.
- The US-India Comprehensive Global and Strategic Partnership in defence cooperation, joint ventures in emerging technologies, transfer of sensitive technologies both civil and military, and cooperation in the nuclear field and space, has given India an unprecedented advantage. This new relevance is being exploited by New Delhi to strengthen its military capability by acquiring military hardware from other countries.
- India might orchestrate a crisis similar to Pulwama aimed at influencing the upcoming elections and maligning Pakistan. The envisaged false flag operation could be a state-managed terrorist attack on a military or civilian site, an operation against infiltration of alleged terrorists into Indian Territory from across the Line of Control/International border or from the sea. Their focus could also be on creating disturbance in Gilgit-Baltistan and the Azad Jammu & Kashmir.

- At present, the relationship between media, state and society is blurred in India. Despite relative independence, Indian media rarely challenges the narratives propagated by the different governments that have remained in power.
- The Indian media mostly projects a secular image of the country. However, their central thrust is inciting anti-Pakistan sentiments which has become a prominent tool for mass mobilisation.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

- Pakistan should develop a holistic response to counter Indian designs by taking into account past experiences, current realities, and future contingencies. This response should consider the challenges posed in the areas of diplomacy, media, and military.
- Pakistan has to emerge out of its current constitutional, political and economic crisis, while striving for good governance in order to make its diplomacy more potent. All this entails major structural changes in most governance spheres.
- To any Indian military aggression, Pakistan's response must be swift, calculated and effect based to restore strategic deterrence without losing escalation control, as was demonstrated by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) post-Balakot scenario.
- Pakistan should prepare itself for any limited military operation which could be aimed to undermine the ongoing CPEC projects in the region. Pakistan must be ready to respond to the use of attack helicopters, surface to surface or air to surface cruise missiles and use of UCAVs in any military misadventures by India.
- Since the new Indian thinking and its post-Pulwama actions point towards its preference to use air power, the PAF would have to be at the forefront of our national response in such an eventuality. At tri-service level, Pakistan's response must be a product of joint thinking, training and operational planning to effectively exploit tri-service capabilities.
- Pakistan should expose the Indian electoral strategy to the international community, both at the government and people's levels, through media and diplomatic interaction. It is, therefore, important to invest in freedom and autonomy of Pakistani media to restore confidence in it.
- Pakistan could offer India a major peace deal closer to the 2024 Indian elections and take steps such as opening up trade routes to thwart any aggressive Indian strategy.
- At national level, using all elements of national power, Pakistan's approach should be that of prevention and preparation rather than reactionary. It needs to set its own house in order first, with national cohesion, political harmony and economic revival as key priorities.

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

MODERATORS REMARKS

AIR MARSHAL FAROOQ HABIB, HI (M) (RETD), SENIOR DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES (CASS), ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd), formally commenced the seminar and discussed the critical implications of Indian politics on regional security, particularly in the context of Pakistan. He highlighted the challenges posed by India's size, hegemonic aspirations, and the ultra-nationalist religious group in power.

The Revenge of Saffron Democracy

According to Air Marshal Habib, the lust for power shown by the BJP and Prime Minister Modi had shifted the cause of conflict between India and Pakistan from geography to political expediency, which might be termed as the 'Revenge of Saffron Democracy.'

Historical Incidents

Air Marshal Farooq further elaborated that with the 18th General Elections approaching in India, there was a resurgence in the use of the 'National Security Card,' often targeting Pakistan for political gain.

"Various past events including the Mumbai attack in 2009, surgical strike drama in 2016 and Balakot in 2019, were aimed at escalating tensions between the two countries to extract political gains."

Pakistan's Security Challenges amid India's Assertive Actions

The Senior Director said that the Indian Defence Minister's recent provocative statements regarding Gilgit-Baltistan suggested a potentially tense environment as the election date approached, with the hyper-jingoistic Indian media amplifying tensions, aligned with the BJP's electoral politics.

"Indian escalatory thrust is likely to be along the three fronts of diplomacy, media, and the military."

He said that Indian actions could present a significant security challenge for Pakistan, exacerbated by internal, domestic issues making a cogent response more demanding.

Responding to India: Pakistan's Holistic Strategy

Air Marshal Farooq Habib emphasised the need for Pakistan to develop a holistic response to counter Indian designs, taking into account past experiences, current realities, and future contingencies. This response should consider the challenges posed in the domains of diplomacy, media, and military.

AMBASSADOR ASHRAF JEHANGIR QAZI, PAKISTAN'S FORMER HIGH COMMISSIONER TO INDIA

Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi was of the view that Pakistan was more of a national security concern than a foreign policy concern for India. This was largely because of the Kashmir dispute and Pakistan's nuclear capability, which was exclusively aimed at deterring India.

“PM Modi's RSS Hindutva ideology portrays Pakistan as justification for the persecution of India's Muslim minority.”

This, he said had gone down very well with its Hindu majority. Accordingly, conflict or tension with Pakistan had paved the way for Modi's landslide electoral win in the aftermath of Pulwama and Balakot in 2019, and would likely do so again in 2024 in the aftermath of his illegal but domestically very popular annexation of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

Modi's Security Card against Pakistan and the Long-Term Strategy

Commenting on the Indian design, Ambassador Qazi said that Modi was likely to leverage the security narrative against Pakistan during the run-up to Indian elections. He posited that Modi would continue India's mantra that 'terror and talks with Pakistan could not go together.' He said that India would blame Pakistan for Kashmiri freedom fighter attacks on Indian occupation forces in Indian Occupied Kashmir and exploit any dissatisfaction in Gilgit-Baltistan and other parts of Pakistan.

“India will also seek to restore Pakistan to the grey list of FATF and thereby, undermine its IMF programme, which can seriously worsen inflation, poverty, and political instability in the country. India can then aim to malign Pakistan internationally to target its nuclear capability.”

The speaker highlighted that India would also seek to undermine the proposed Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) plan of cooperation between Pakistan and the Gulf countries through its considerable investment leverage and political influence in these states. It would also attempt to tighten Pakistan's two-front situation by stepping up economic and other cooperation with Afghanistan to reduce Pakistan's diplomatic leverage there.

Through such pressures, India would seek the support of Gulf countries, the United States, and other international powers aimed at compelling Pakistan to do the following:

- i. Progressively recognise the territorial status quo in Jammu and Kashmir;
- ii. Stop raising the issue of Jammu and Kashmir in the United Nations and other international forums;

- iii. Enter into talks with India for a final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir without making a reversal of the illegal 5th August, 2019 annexation of the disputed territory, a pre-condition;
- iv. Enter into a 'No War Pact' with India without making the Kashmir settlement a pre-condition which has always been the case in the past;
- v. Begin dismantling its nuclear weapons capability since India would be an 'elder brother' rather than an 'enemy';
- vi. Begin loosening its CPEC, military and strategic ties with China as Chinese strategic alliance with Pakistan had so far largely prevented India from establishing its hegemony.

He added that these six points were also part of India's overall longer-term strategy towards Pakistan and that the US and its NATO allies would likely support India in this endeavour.

Ambassador Qazi referred to some commentators' opinion that this would effectively terminate Pakistan's strategic partnership with China, which had been the lynchpin of its security, foreign, and economic connectivity policy. In return for the above, India would likely offer trade, investment, joint ventures, tourism and travel concessions to Pakistan.

"In this way, India will seek to convince public opinion in Pakistan – that as India-Pakistan relations improve within the context of Indian sub-continental hegemony; Hindutva hostility towards Pakistan and the Indian Muslim community will begin to subside. This is considered a part of the overall long-term Indian-rationalised strategy towards Pakistan."

He added that while India could seek to weaken the raison d'être or ideology of Pakistan among Pakistani liberal elites as a diplomatic strategy, it would not wish to re-absorb Pakistan – as that would make it politically impossible to control, persecute and discriminate against a possible eventual Muslim minority of over 700 million (including Muslims of India and Bangladesh). Such a colossal Muslim community would make a Hindu Rashtra an impossible dream and undermine the fascist attraction of the RSS, the communal appeal of Hindutva, and the political future of Modi.

Analysing the Global Response

Deliberating on past instances, Ambassador Qazi acknowledged that the Western political and security community had not supported Pakistan in the aftermath of Balakot. Nor had it supported Pakistan after India's illegal annexation of Indian Occupied Kashmir – even though Genocide Watch had issued two Genocide Alerts because of the brutal Indian crackdown and lockdown in the Valley, and Western human rights organisations had condemned India's actions. According to him, this was due to Pakistan's unfavourable image in contrast to India's image as an

emerging power boasting the third largest economy and market in the world as well as its impressive science and technology achievements. Moreover, Western criticisms of the human rights travesties of Modi, the RSS and Hindutva did not translate into strained relations with India because of the false perception that constitutional democracy was not being aborted, ignoring India's treatment of its Muslim minority as also highlighted by Arundhati Roy. However, regarding Pakistan, the Western perception remained tainted.

Ambassador Qazi said that even though the West might not have seriously objected to India's violation of the constitutional and democratic process, including widespread human rights violations and media censorship; in Pakistan, the Western public opinion was much different. The Western governments could not ignore their public opinion, including parliamentary legislation, especially with regard to countries where there was no countervailing political, economic and strategic considerations as was currently the case with Pakistan.

“Pakistan's leverage of strategic importance has declined after their [Western governments] loss of interest in Afghanistan.”

Accordingly, in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the international community would be fascinated with the usual news coverage of, the so-called 'largest democratic electoral exercise in the world.' Mainstream international media headlines would be preoccupied with India in a very positive fashion, and would ignore the underlying reality of fascism.

Pre-empting Indian Escalation and Highlighting Concerns about India's Misuse of the Security Card

“Pakistan ought to improve its international credibility in order to exercise effective foreign policy or diplomatic options. Accordingly, Pakistan will first have to come out of its current worst ever constitutional, political, and economic crisis.”

Ambassador Qazi said that the current political, economic, governance, law and order, and international image situation, pre-empting Indian escalation was not a task for diplomacy, but for good governance and all it entailed was radical structural change. Thus, governance ought to be in the interests of 90 per cent of the people of Pakistan instead of in the interests of the 4 per cent economic, political, social, religious and military elites.

“Any effort to highlight concerns about India's misuse of the security card would be unavailing as long as Pakistan is perceived as unstable – where the economy and political process are in a tailspin. As long as this perception is not changed, India's repeated use of the security card against Pakistan during its electoral campaign would be internationally noted, and largely ignored.”

Conclusion

While concluding his talk, Ambassador Qazi said that though this appeared to be a bleak assessment, however, it was not a hopeless situation as long as the will and intent to serve Pakistan and its suffering people overcame political stratagems to dominate and exploit them.

INDIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS: MILITARY IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN

AIR MARSHAL WASEEM UD DIN, HI(M), SBT (RETD), FORMER DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES (CASS), ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

Historical Perspective

i) Past Crises and Indian Multi-pronged Strategy

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din recalled the acrimonious history of South Asia. He highlighted that despite not turning into a full-scale war given the nuclear overhang, past crises between India and Pakistan had the potential of escalation and drew international attention. He pointed out that during all crises, India adopted a multi-pronged strategy that:

- Blamed Pakistan for the terrorist incidents/false flag operations.
- Created a media hype to win the war of narratives.
- Projected Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism.
- Won over international support for any cross-border counterterrorism limited military operation.

ii) Military Instrument and Kashmir

The speaker explained that the military instrument was used to compel and coerce Pakistan to seize legitimate support to Kashmir's freedom struggle, put pressure on international community, especially the US, to force Pakistan to abandon its position on the Jammu & Kashmir issue and also extract a commitment from Pakistan to permanently end alleged infiltration from its soil. He highlighted that although Pakistan had adhered to its principled stance on Jammu & Kashmir, the Indian strategy of compellence and coercion had been a success in the Indian minds and remained an incentive for the Indian leadership to be trigger happy and follow the same pattern, without shying away from using military force.

“Despite facing humiliation and embarrassment post-Pulwama, India has done much better in the battle of narratives through an unprecedented media campaign, winning international support and legitimacy to its right of self-defence.”

Politico-Religious Factors

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din added that the ascendance of BJP had a significant impact on relations between the two neighbours. Under Modi, concept of Hindutva had gained greater prominence in Indian politics, Hindu nationalism is booming, and anti-Pakistan rhetoric had skyrocketed. According to him, the sabre-rattling and aggressive posturing by Indian political, military and RSS leadership against Pakistan was increasingly becoming offensive and in sync with the ideologically motivated expansionary orientation towards 'Akhand Bharat'. He shared that there was talk of undoing the Partition, taking back Gilgit-Baltistan and dismantling Pakistan using military force. The annexation of Jammu & Kashmir had been termed as the beginning of a journey northward which would complete with the acquisition of Gilgit-Baltistan. The speaker asserted that:

“The current Indian leadership will go to any length in harming Pakistan and is willing to take reckless decisions, disregarding the sovereignty of the neighbouring states for the realisation of the greater Indian dream.”

Politico-Military Factors

The Air Marshal underscored the shift in US policy in the region and its strategy to strengthen India as a bulwark against China. Indian pursuit to build its conventional military capabilities and its civil, military and nuclear technological base had been bolstered by this policy shift.

“The synergetic benefits created by the US-India Comprehensive Global and Strategic Partnership in defence cooperation, joint ventures in emerging technologies, transfer of sensitive technologies both civil and military, cooperation in the nuclear field and space, has given India an unprecedented advantage.”

In his view, joint ventures in combination with the ASAT capabilities, hyper and supersonic weapons, the BMD and access to advanced information by the US under COMCASA, LEMOA and BECA, along with new strategic alliances like QUAD and I2U2, had empowered Indian strategic strength. The speaker argued that this new relevance was being exploited by India to influence American policies by acquiring military hardware from France, Israel and other Western countries, even Russia.

Implications for Pakistan

“The most critical for Pakistan vis-a-vis US-India Strategic Partnership is the US support to India in its counterterrorism efforts. The joint statement from the US and India issued in June 2023, calls for action against al-Qaeda, Daesh, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen.”

The speaker said that it also demanded immediate action by Pakistan to ensure that no territory under its control was used for launching cross-border terrorist attacks

and that the perpetrators of Mumbai and Pathankot attacks be brought to justice, which was directly tantamount to blaming Pakistan for all terrorist activities inside occupied Jammu & Kashmir and India. While all these claims were totally baseless and lack any credence, they gave legitimacy to Indian cross-border military actions and retaliation to any future terrorist attack on its soil or a false flag operation.

Joint Doctrine 2017

“Unhindered access to the new technologies, latest military hardware and American support has added to the Indian arrogance. Indian military posturing and doctrines have become more aggressive and offensive.”

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din highlighted that India's 'Joint Doctrine 2017' focused on the country's conception of its internal security and its strategy for managing threats across the full spectrum of military conflict. It addressed the guiding principles for military response to every eventuality from nuclear war to internal security and counterinsurgency, reflecting the mindset of Indian leadership and its intention to engage Pakistan in a low intensity conflict under the nuclear overhang.

Indian Comprehensive Strategy

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din explained that in the new Indian military thinking, airpower was considered strategic in nature and was clearly seen as the main instrument of national power serving across the full spectrum of the conflict.

“In its 'Basic Doctrine', the IAF besides other roles is to be employed for sub-conventional operations, punitive strikes and political signalling.”

The speaker posited that India had been employing all elements of national power, sub-conventional tools, coercive and aggressive diplomacy and using her clout to strangulate Pakistan economically and isolate it diplomatically. Extensive information warfare, sponsored proxies were being used to create unrest and divisions in Pakistan.

“Indian quest to find space for limited conventional conflict remaining below the nuclear thresholds was not only the biggest threat to crisis stability in the region but also to the world peace.”

Scenario: False Flag Operation

i) Location

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din was convinced that at time and place of its choosing, India might orchestrate a crisis similar to Pulwama or any of the past incidents aimed at influencing its upcoming elections and maligning Pakistan. The envisaged False Flag Operation could be an orchestrated terrorist attack on any military or civilian site or a false flag operation against infiltration of alleged terrorists into Indian territory from across the Line of Control/International border or from the sea.

“Such an act is likely to be planned in the North because India focuses on Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, primarily due to its strategic importance to CPEC.”

ii) Nature of Operation

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din posited that the Indian envisaged military operation would be measured and calibrated. Indian military planners might resort to using attack helicopters or heliborne commando operations; use surface-to-surface or air-to-surface cruise missiles like BrahMos; employ the IAF with standoff weapons or use UCAVs, an option which might yield the desired results with more accuracy and impunity. Likewise, amassing troops on the international border to raise the ante and put pressure on Pakistan though less likely could not be ruled out.

“Learning lessons from post-Balakot, India would be more professional and safety of her assets in air would be accorded top priority with the help of Cyber, ECM, ECCM, standoff precision weapons and force multipliers etc. Military action in the South, though unlikely, could be conducted jointly by the IAF and Indian Navy.”

iii) Pakistan’s Response

Discussing Pakistan’s response, Air Marshal Waseem ud Din emphasised that Pakistan’s response must be swift, calculated and effect based to restore the strategic deterrence without losing escalation control as was achieved by the PAF post Balakot.

“Since the new Indian thinking and its post-Pulwama actions point towards its preference to use air power, the PAF will have to be at the forefront of our national response in such an eventuality. At tri-service level, our response must be a product of joint thinking, training and operational planning to effectively exploit tri-service capabilities.”

The speaker added that Pakistan had to formulate its military concepts and enhance its capabilities to instill a fear of loss, retribution, and pain in the enemy besides enhancing the deterrence value of conventional forces. The new doctrines must align with the prevalent threat, the changing nature of war and evolving strategic environment.

“At the national level, using all elements of national power, our approach should be that of Prevention and Preparation rather than reactionary. We need to set our house in order first, with national cohesion, political harmony and economic revival as key priorities.”

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din concluded by saying that Pakistan needed to unite as a nation, show resolve, have faith in our abilities and put our act together.

DR MUHAMMAD MUJEEB AFZAL, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, QUAID-I-AZAM UNIVERSITY,
ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

Relationship between Media, State and Society

Dr Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal referred to four schools of thought to explain the relationship between media, state, and society. He stated that the first school of thought argued that media strongly influenced politics and society, while the second school opined that media only reflected the happenings in politics and society. The third school of thought viewed all three entities as independent actors without media influencing politics and society, while the fourth school assumed there was an interactive and circular interrelationship between media, state, and society. Supporting the fourth school of thought, Dr Afzal stated that the relationship between media, state, and society was blurred on the periphery. There was a mutually interactive process through which media, state, and society defined and redefined one another.

Evolution of Indian Media

Highlighting the evolution of the Indian media, Dr Afzal stated that the political order dominated it during the colonial period, but it gained relative independence in the post-independence period. However, despite this, the Indian media rarely challenged political powers or the government. He further stated that all media publications and media outlets at that time projected secular themes at the centre but communitarian at the constituency level, thus creating massive rhetoric of secularism at the centre and Hindu nationalist themes at the constituency level, which suited the Congress system. Hindu nationalist themes were promoted through television, films, and other mediums. The Hindu nationalists, however, were projected in the media as peripheral or rogue elements.

In the 1980s, Congress introduced market reforms, bringing private businesses into the media. Dr Afzal stated that it was then that media and power came closer to one another, and media became part of the political order.

“Media has been shifted from moralising traditional values to promoting entertainment, and almost everything, from violence and rape to corruption, news, and communalism, has become entertainment.”

According to the speaker, foreign policy also began to be treated as entertainment, with Bollywood copying Hollywood and projecting India as one of the greatest powers. Hindu nationalists also developed their own media outlets in multiple languages, including English, Hindi, regional languages, and even languages not spoken extensively; created massive literature to acquire credibility; and developed

contacts with the local masses through local publications produced in ordinary languages.

‘Anti-Pakistanism’ as a Major Mobilising Theme in India and the Role of Media

Highlighting the extent of anti-Pakistan sentiments among the Indian population, Dr Afzal cited a survey’s results, which found that 76% of Indians perceived Pakistan as a threat and 63% perceived Pakistan as a very serious main threat.

“Hence ‘Anti-Pakistanism’ has been and will remain the most prominent theme for mobilisation in India.”

Dr Afzal stated that the secular elements in Indian politics projected Pakistan as reactionary, communal, living in the past, the result of the Raj conspiracy, and a failed experiment, while the Hindu nationalists projected Pakistan as a threat, a main target of revenge for 1,000 years of enslavement, and a hurdle in the Hindu revivalist movement. Hindu nationalists incited communal clashes and war hysteria closer to all major elections, strengthening the fault lines between the secular and the Hindus alongside Muslims and the Hindus. According to him, one of the best examples of the utilisation of anti-Pakistan card for electoral gains was when Atal Bihari Vajpayee adopted Hindu themes and anti-Pakistan processes while contesting elections in the 1990s.

He further stated that the projection of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) (now renamed as Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance – INDIA) as pro-Muslim and soft on Pakistan had been one of the major mobilising themes utilised by Modi for electoral gains and media had been used to disseminate the message directly to the people. Dr Afzal highlighted that Modi was the third most popular person on Twitter, with 40 to 50 million followers, and the second most popular leader on Facebook. Modi was projected on the media as a Lion, a power figure, Hindu Hriday Samrat – the Hindu emperor of the popular people, or Vikas Purush – a development man picked from Gujarat, while the media outlets or personnel who opposed Modi were projected as traitors or prostitutes, among other things.

Citing an example to highlight the influence of ‘anti-Pakistanism’ on Indian politics and elections, Dr Afzal referred to the role of Pulwama incident in the BJP’s re-election. He stated that the BJP was not very popular in rural India, but rural India was strongly anti-Pakistan. After the Pulwama incident, the BJP gained an additional 22 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka, and Modi’s overall approval rating increased from 32 per cent to 63 per cent. In contrast, Rahul Gandhi opposed Pulwama, and his popularity decreased from 23 to 8 per cent.

Dr Afzal was of the view that the anti-Pakistan card could be utilised again around the 2024 elections in India. Pakistan was already being projected very aggressively in Indian media by Indian politicians and Indian state ministers as irrelevant to the South Asian state system.

“There can be something like a surgical strike around the 2024 elections, although the BJP will wait for the results of five major states, including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Mizoram, before resorting to it.”

According to Dr Afzal, if Modi won the 2024 elections, he would continue to follow the same path, but even if the Congress-led alliance – INDIA – won the elections, one should not expect any fundamental change for Pakistan.

Lastly, he proposed the following way forward:

- Pakistan should expose the Indian electoral strategy to the international community, both at the great powers’ and ordinary people’s levels, through media and diplomatic channels internationally. The Pakistani media could play a vital role, and it was important to develop confidence in the Pakistani media and re-invest freedom, autonomy, and money in it.
- Pakistan should assert its position as a sovereign nation and convey to India through media, diplomacy, or other means that it was not an ‘electoral toy.’
- Pakistan could offer India a major peace deal closer to the 2024 elections in India, such as opening up trade routes to thwart any aggressive Indian strategy.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

AIR MARSHAL ASHFAQUE ARAIN, HI(M), Sbt (RETD), ADVISOR, CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES (CASS), ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

Air Marshal Ashfaque Arain (Retd) in his *Concluding Remarks* said that the anti-Pakistan rhetoric remained an important factor in Indian domestic politics. He recalled the political aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, which was manipulated by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to get a second term in office. He said the strategy to build on anti-Pakistan sentiment got refined over the years; and that the BJP had been presenting various ‘India-centric’ manifestos primarily to influence domestic and international politics. Earlier it was ‘Shinning India’, in 2005 onwards, all its slogans were centred on anti-Pakistan narrative. As regards the upcoming elections in India; he said that the situation this time around was more complex with the rise of Hindutva ideology.

Contrasting Fortunes: India’s Rising Stature and Pakistan’s Challenges

Air Marshal Arain asserted that presently, India enjoyed the stature of a robust economic power with strong international prestige, and had greater resonance of its narrative.

“Having hosted the latest G-20 Summit, India has achieved a boost in its international stature.”

In drawing parallels with Pakistan's situation, the Air Marshal observed that the nation faced economic challenges and noted the presence of political differences, accentuated by uncertainties surrounding the country's future electoral landscape. This incentivised the BJP or the Modi-led government to connive; stage a false flag, state-managed operation; and then undertake punitive actions against Pakistan.

Anticipating False Flag Operations: Need for Preparedness

Air Marshal Arain highlighted the possibility of a false flag operation, suggesting the Indian Air Force might utilise the element of surprise inherent to air power. However, he cautioned against overlooking the chance of naval or land-based attacks. In light of these considerations, he recommended a comprehensive preparatory strategy to counter any unforeseen developments and emphasised staying alert to potential media escalation surrounding the event.

Missed Opportunities: Lessons from India's Surgical Strike

“A credible national government, with international recognition has to be in place, in order to provide foreign policy and diplomatic direction to the country.”

Citing the 2016 Indian surgical strike, he expressed regret, suggesting that if there had been a response to that act, the 2019 Balakot strike might not have occurred.

Concluding his remarks on an optimistic note, Air Marshal Arain hoped that India would not indulge in any misadventure considering its economic interests. Nonetheless, he said Pakistan's decision-making must reflect an agile and confident approach, without which the country was slated to keep its course of collision. He reiterated that the major takeaway from the seminar was that Pakistan needed to put its house in order first to avoid any external hostility.

VOTE OF THANKS

AIR MARSHAL FARHAT HUSSAIN KHAN, HI(M), SBt (RETD), ADVISOR ON AVIATION TO THE CARETAKER PRIME MINISTER OF PAKISTAN & PRESIDENT, CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES (CASS), ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan expressed his gratitude to the distinguished attendees of the forum. He said that the objective of the discussion was to raise awareness about India's possible course of action specifically during the election campaigns which were likely to have far-reaching security consequences for the region. The rationale behind selecting this topic well in advance was to ensure that awareness may enable individuals and institutions to better prepare for potential implications.

Indian Influence on US-Pakistan Relations

Air Marshal Khan said that in the prevalent regional and global environment, India wielded significant influence, particularly with its growing strategic relationship with the US.

“This relationship has even started to influence the US policies towards Pakistan that’s why Pakistan can always be targeted through international influencers like the IMF and FATF.”

Air Marshal Khan highlighted that international businesses were increasingly investing in India due to its vast market potential, an area where Pakistan significantly lagged. He said that Pakistan needed to follow a multifaceted approach. Pakistan needed a dynamic foreign policy, showcased by demonstrating to the world that it was a stable and responsible nation.

“Political stability and economic viability are a must for Pakistan to become a respectable country in the world, only then, the nefarious designs of India can be tackled effectively.”

**Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi (Retd)**

Ashraf Jehangir Qazi is a diplomat of international fame. He has held several significant appointments including, Pakistan's High Commissioner to India and Ambassador to the US, China, Russia, Syria, and the then-East Germany. He was appointed as the head of the UN mission in Iraq where he helped coordinate humanitarian and reconstruction efforts. He has also served as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Sudan. Ambassador Qazi

is a prolific writer and shares his insights and opinions in various newspapers.

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din, HI (M), SBt (Retd)

Air Marshal Waseem ud Din served as Director 'Aerospace and Policy' at the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Islamabad. He is a graduate of Combat Commanders School, Turkish Armed Forces Staff College and Royal College of Defence Studies (United Kingdom). His important assignments at AHQ included Director General Air Force Strategic Command, Air Officer Commanding Air Defence Command, Deputy Chief of Air Staff Administration and Deputy Chief of Staff Operations.

**Dr Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal**

Dr Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal is Assistant Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University. He has a vast teaching experience and has contributed several publications at national and international forums. He is also the author of the book titled '*Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian Muslims*'. Dr Afzal regularly participates in national and international forums and symposiums.



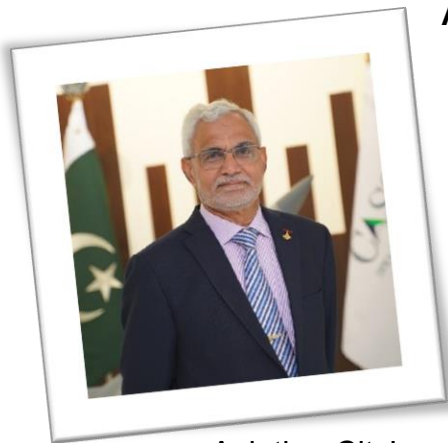
Air Marshal Farooq Habib, HI(M) (Retd)

Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd) joined the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Islamabad as Senior Director in February 2022. A graduate of National Defence University and Air War College, he has 36 years' experience of military aviation as fighter pilot in the Pakistan Air Force. He holds Master's Degrees in Strategic Studies and Defence & Strategic Studies. During service with the PAF, he has held various appointments including Commandant of Air War College, Deputy Chief of Air Staff Training, Deputy Chief of Air Staff Personnel and Vice Chief of Air Staff. He lectures regularly at National Defence University and Air War College on related subjects. He is a recipient of Hilal-i-Imtiaz (Military) for his services to the PAF.



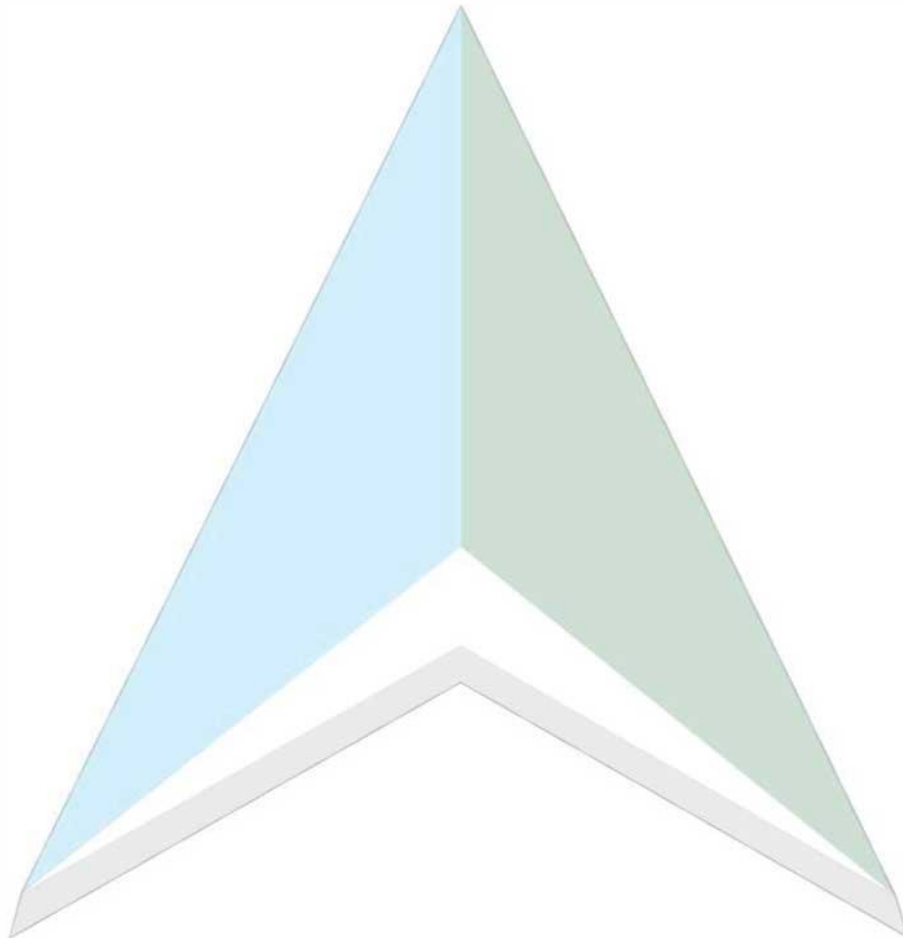
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Command and Staff



Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan, HI (M), SBt (Retd)

Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan, current Advisor on Aviation to the Caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan; and President CASS, has rich experience in aviation and industrial management, diplomacy, and negotiations. During his service, he remained on various important command and staff appointments, including Vice Chief of the Air Staff and Chairman Pakistan Aeronautical Complex Board. He has also served as Pakistan's Air Attaché in New Delhi, India. He is the co-author of 'The Aviation City' and 'Milestones' about the growth of military aviation industry in Pakistan and its way forward.



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📍 Old Airport Road,
Islamabad, Pakistan

☎ +92 051 5405011

🌐 www.casstt.com

✉ cass.thinkers@casstt.com

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