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Dissecting the Pulwama Attack



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Introduction

February 14, 2019 saw one of the deadliest attacks in Kashmir in over a decade, which left over 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel dead. The attack which was almost immediately claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a terrorist outfit based out of Pakistan, was one of the first of its kind – biggest attack in Kashmir in a decade, largest number of security forces personnel death in such attack (that is, in a non-war situation), and the first Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) suicide attack, marking a shift in the nature of attacks in the state. Naturally, in the aftermath of such an attack, TV channels and newspapers, as well as quotidian expressions between people, has been intense and emotionally charged discussions about the attack – the manner in which it was conducted, the role of JeM, the Pakistani state apparatus, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), as well as the response that the Indian state should take.

Due to the nature of the attack, the magnitude of violence, as well as the pressure of the upcoming elections, the Modi government

Key Points

1. The Pulwama attack marked a paradigm shift in the nature of attacks in the valley (large-scale VBIED suicide attack with largest number of security forces personnel killed in this manner), as well as in the state's response (diplomatic and economic manoeuvres used along with conventional military response together as a hard power response option).
2. While the Pulwama attack was not as sophisticated or grand-scale as compared to previous Jaish-e-Mohammed's (JeM) attacks, the attack showed the group's access to people, large quantity of explosives, deep financial pockets, as well as links to the Pakistani military apparatus.
3. The repercussions of political and diplomatic fallout of the Pulwama attack would be felt for a long time to come in the region.
4. When all is said and done, we need to ensure that JeM or any other terrorist group is unable to carry out any attack against Indian population on our soil, with or without the support of the 'deep-state' masters of Pakistan – the Army and the ISI.
5. While physical precautions and military action may be needed to deter such actions, it will need psychological warfare as a part of a larger information warfare campaign.

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has sought to have a strong response on military, diplomatic and economic fronts. This has included redaction of the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status given to Pakistan, recalling of ambassadors, launching coordinated counterterrorism operations against the “master-minds” of the attack in four days’ time, as well as conducting multiple counteroffensive strikes deep in Pakistan. All this has greatly heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, and has the region and the world keenly watching the developments for a downward spiral and intense chaos in the region.

While much has been made of the political and diplomatic developments related to the Pulwama attack, there has been scant attention given to the nature of the attack. The organisation of the attack, the financing route, as well as the motivations of the perpetrators of the attack has not seen much coverage in the discussions in India or abroad. This paper aims to look at these very things – the conduct of the attack, the timing of the attack, as well as the possible motivations based on the effects that we are seeing on the different sections of people. The analysis put forward in this paper would help in assessing the (immediate) future security environment, thereby allowing us to draw up medium and long-term policy responses to state-sponsored terrorism that India is facing.

Section 2 of the paper looks at the conduct of the attack, and argues that while the attack was not sophisticated as compared to previous attacks conducted by JeM, the Pulwama attacks demonstrated the group’s access to the youth of the valley, to large quantities of explosives and to well-funded coffers of anti-India organisations and the ISI. Section 3 of the paper subsequently looks at the effect of the attack on the people of Kashmir, and the Indian and Pakistani governments. Since the Pulwama attacks have had a negative impact on the national and international image of Imran Khan and his government, Section 4 examines the motivations of the Pakistani ISI and Army in supporting the conduct of the attack, as well as the motivations and benefits accrued to JeM. The final section explores the

possibility of escalatory attacks and the need for more extensive psychological warfare as a part of a larger information warfare by the Indian government against terrorist organisations targeting our country as well as their benefactors.

The Conventionality and Unconventionality of the Attack

Kashmir appears to be an unending conflict. The state has since 1947 seen numerous instances of attacks, bombings, shootings, and even two wars being fought over it. All of which has led to people feeling resentful, enraged, vulnerable, insecure and vengeful, particularly due to frequent curfews and disruptions to the rhythm of daily life. This has also resulted in an uptick of radicalism in the valley – something that has been a major concern for the security apparatus of the nation. Despite all this, there has rarely been a case registered where we have seen such a large-scale suicide attack being carried out by a local Kashmiri. The fact that the terrorist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) managed to reach out to and sufficiently radicalise Adil Ahmed Dar, a local boy of just 20 years, should therefore be a cause for major concern. An official was quoted musing on the same: “There is only one other case of a local Kashmiri youth carrying out a suicide bombing near Badami Bagh cantonment in Srinagar almost 20 years ago. The fidayeens always came from Pakistan. We are investigating the exact sequence of events how the attack was planned.”¹

Not only was the Pulwama attack one of the rare suicide attacks in India, but also one with the highest casualty rate. For instance, there were nine IED blasts in 2018, including two in Pulwama, but with no casualties; CRPF Road Opening Party (ROP) were attacked in 2013 and 2014, with one casualty each; attacks on CRPF convoys on December 7, 2015 had 5 injured, on February 20, 2016 had two killed, and on June 26, 2016 had 8 casualties.² The Pulwama attack was therefore one of the largest and most devastating attacks in the state and against police personnel. Despite the high casualty rate, the attack in and of

itself was not entirely sophisticated. The SUV used in the attack was laden with explosives (either ANFO or RDX or perhaps a mix) in high quantities, got into the convoy close enough to a bus, and detonated itself.³ As for the agent himself, Dar was a recent member of JeM, making him a low-level operative – someone that the terrorist group can easily expend themselves of. Using such an easily available vehicle for the VBIED by a conveniently placed local, who was a low-level but highly radicalised suicide bomber does not scream sophistication. The group did not need a high number of individuals to conduct the attack, nor did they need an elaborate plan to enter a secure area or a getaway plan or vehicle. It was perhaps one of the cheapest attacks conducted by the group, with least loss of personnel and face, and a very high “success” rate and death count.

While the attack does not demonstrate a well-healed group planning a large, sophisticated attack, they managed to show *access*. First, JeM demonstrated that it has access to the local Kashmiri population. In recent times, the discussions in the corridors of power had been centred around the new uprising of the disgruntled youth of Kashmir.⁴ All discussions and debates by the experts pointed to the organicness of the recent uprisings, especially since 2016. The Pulwama attack changes that. It shows the continued influence hold of extremist and terrorist organisations such as JeM in the valley. Movements and uprisings do not start by themselves – they are planned, ignited, and modulated by such groups by exerting control over a section of the population. More importantly, the attack shows the reach of access of the group into the population. By targeting and using a young and new operative, JeM remarkably proves its access to the youth of Kashmir – most likely through schools and colleges. A wider network of workers of the group exists than acknowledged.

Second, the Pulwama attack shows the access that the group has to explosives. While the official statement on the kind of explosive used (ANFO or RDX) and its trace

origins are being investigated, the fact remains that JeM or one of its allies managed to procure explosives of about 80 kg to a few hundred kilograms. Explosives of any variety are not that easily accessible, and the ability to procure and/or refine them shows that the terrorist outfit has access to those individuals and groups that manufacture and supply such explosives. Given the high volume of explosives used in the Pulwama attack, it is safe to assume that the matériel was procured over a period of time, most likely by a host of overground and underground workers, supported by various sympathisers. The failure to recognise movement of high-quality explosives, putting together of the bomb, possible rehearsals and reconnaissance of the movements of the CRPF convoy highlights the lack of credible intelligence gathering capabilities in India. Had electronic monitoring and surveillance been supplemented with adequate human intelligence reports on the activities of known terrorist sympathisers, the Pulwama attack could have been better anticipated and, perhaps, foiled.

The large amount of weaponised explosives also goes to show the access that this group has to big financiers of terrorist attacks. Explosives of any variety are not only hard to come by, and are mostly expensive to procure. JeM has certainly found itself a generous benefactor in certain anti-India organisations and ISI.

Finally, the Pulwama attack reveals the access that JeM has to the Pakistani military establishment. The terrorist outfit, which is located inside an Army Cantonment in Bhawalpur,⁵ and whose leader is often sighted going to the Rawalpindi Army Hospital for treatment, clearly has strong ties to the so-called “deep-state” in Pakistan. When considered along with the fact that JeM is a part of the United Jihad Council, which runs under the guidance of the Pakistani ISI, we see that the group is well connected with all the actors in the state apparatus, military, as well as the ISI who matter. This access has now transformed into acceptance and perhaps assistance given to the group for its attacks against India.

Political Repercussions of the Attack

The intensity and scale of the attack has understandably led to an emotional outcry from people of India and the world. Over 58 countries⁶ have condemned the Pulwama attack and have extended support to India in getting Azhar, the JeM chief, under the United Nations list of known terrorists, including the USA, Iran, France, UK, etc. With emotions running high and calls for retributions coming from almost all quarters, the Indian government has recalled its ambassador from Pakistan, announced its intentions of reducing water supply from Indus river system, and has recanted the MFN status earlier granted to the country. While such actions have high symbolic value and constitute effective signals of displeasure, they do not necessarily have an impact on the economic or diplomatic stature of Pakistan.

To understand the nature of the attack we must go beyond noting the overt actions and symbolic gestures of the states, and look at the effect of the attack other than the immediate effect of having a high body count. Looking first to the possible effects on the populations of the two countries, we see that there was a general atmosphere of horror at the atrocity committed. The Kashmiri population too has been shocked at the intensity of the attack. The extreme brutality of the terrorist attack, along with a long history of terrorists' operations in Kashmir, has prompted thousands of Kashmiri youth to join the Indian Army. Remarking on the fact that at least 2,500 Kashmiri men applied at the Indian Army recruitment centre at Baramullah to fill 111 vacancies, "Tariq Aziz, an army aspirant told ANI that Kashmiri youth will choose the army to earn a livelihood of respect and serve the nation."⁷ Clearly, the JeM's hope of inspiring more Kashmiri youth to join the terrorist organisation or committing suicide attacks has clearly not panned out the way they would have hoped. The intended affect and the end effect have not matched for them.

As for the effect on the Indian state, the Pulwama attack proved to be a rallying point for the country. In a rare instance, all the political parties have stood

together with the government in power, instead of trying to politicise the issue. Seen along with the cries for retaliation from a large section of the public, and the Modi government's wish to be projected as a "New India" as a strong-man state, the attack could not have come at a better time for Prime Minister Modi. If the response to the attack can be considered to be the litmus test for the upcoming elections, Modi could not have asked for a better result. In launching the first counteroffensive after a full reconnaissance of the "masterminds" behind the attack and succeeding in killing three JeM terrorists, the Prime Minister has proven strong will and harsh response to terrorist attacks. This incident would certainly provide PM Modi and his party with a bragging point for the upcoming election cycle.

However, while the attack appears to have strengthened the international and domestic image of PM Modi, the same cannot be said of Imran Khan. With the attack taking place on the security personnel of India by terrorists based out of his country (i.e., Pakistan) just before the visit of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, has put a dampener on the image projected by Khan on the domestic and international front. He no longer appears to be someone who has complete control over all the elements within his state. The attack has also deeply affected India-Pakistan relations, something that PM Khan has been striving to improve even before his election. With the international community increasingly isolating Pakistan on the international stage and cutting access to previous major sources of funding, the Pulwama attack will only expedite the process. It seems only natural that the fact of the Pakistani state allowing terrorist organisations to operate within its country would have an impact on the ongoing discussions at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) discussions in Paris with regard to placing Pakistan under the black list. It remains entirely possible that the knowledge of JeM operating out of a Pakistani military cantonment can make Pakistan's transition from the grey to the black list permanent.

Strategic Logic of the Pulwama Attack

Despite the negative consequences apparent for Pakistan due to the reception and response to the attack, conducting the Pulwama attack at this time at the particular location and target selection makes a great deal of sense. Given the scale of the attack and that JeM had recently shifted its headquarters inside the cantonment in Bhawalpur, it is clear that the Pulwama attack was at the behest of the ISI. It is their motivations that we must look at to understand the conduct of the attack.

The Pulwama strike was the first attack of ISI under the leadership of its new Director General, Lt General Asim Munir. The attack could be seen as his way of announcing his arrival on the scene. While he has previously served directly under the Chief of Army Staff General Bajwa, conducting such a large-scale attack in Kashmir a day after an equally big attack in Iran will most likely help cement his position within the organisation—he is now one of the boys. At the same time, the Pulwama attack has been to the benefit of the Army Chief General Bajwa as well. Despite General Bajwa's role in shaping, developing and enhancing Pakistan's role on the international stage, he is getting increasingly sidelined by Imran Khan and his party members. The matter gets even more complicated due to apprehensions that PM Khan is not interested in extending General Bajwa's term which comes to an end this November. Giving a green light for the conduct of such a large scale and devastating attack that is sure to harm the image of Imran Khan and ensure that his diplomatic efforts with India fail can be seen as a checkmate to the PM of Pakistan. It is the Pakistani military apparatus that would either allow or not allow any relations with the country's neighbours. They still call the shots, and Imran Khan is simply the figurehead—this is the reality that all need to accept.

The Pulwama attack held strategic benefits for Masood Azhar's Jaish-e-Mohammed as well. First, the attack brought back the focus of the world on Kashmir. With

the recent counterterrorism activities as well as the Sadbhavana activities being carried out by the army, the national, regional, and international focus has moved away from Kashmir. Conducting a suicide attack by a young Kashmiri boy would help bring back the focus on the alleged "malicious" activities of India in Kashmir. This objective of the group has largely been met. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, while most nations stood by India and condemned it, there were also multiple "Kashmir Solidarity" groups that sprang up in various universities around the world, including the ones at Brown University in USA and SOAS in London, UK. These groups have subsequently raised issues of atrocities committed by India that would have led to a young man of just 20 years old to give up his life. This large-scale suicide attack has thus brought back the focus on Kashmir—for good or for bad.

Next, with the Pulwama attack having the highest death toll in over two decades of terrorist attacks, JeM can be seen to have heightened its status among the various jihadist groups in Pakistan. The fact that all the casualties were of the security apparatus of India (i.e., CRPF) has most likely cemented JeM's new status. In displaying the vulnerability of the Indian security apparatus in Kashmir by using a (dispensable) newly-joined disgruntled Kashmiri youth, JeM has reasserted itself on the terrorism scene after a long lull in a manner that will ensure its position in the hierarchy for a long time to come. Finally, conducting the attack as a suicide attack has two additional benefits for the terrorist group. It allows them to project their violence as a "voice." With people understandably trying to ascertain the motivations of Dar in joining the group and deciding to blow himself up, the group has managed to project the horrific violence of the attack as a "voice" of frustration, resentment and anger of the young Kashmiri population. Second, a suicide attack helps build up and enhance a culture of martyrdom within its ranks and "lay" supporters. What is most

certain, however, is that like all other suicide attacks by terrorist organisations worldwide, the Pulwama attack is a part of a larger campaign by JeM.

What to Expect Next

Due to the intensity of the attack on the security forces as well as the high casualty rate, we can expect the political and diplomatic fallout of the Pulwama attack to be discussed for a long time to come. It is unlikely that the Indian government as well as the larger political dispensation of the country would let go of the issue soon, especially given its rally-round-the-flag effect. More counterterrorism operations can be expected in the hinterland, as they are already taking place. However, the question remains whether the strikes would be extended to a strategic level beyond the recent airstrikes by the Indian Air Force deep beyond the Line of Control (LOC)—something that was not permitted even during the Kargil incident—to include the new headquarters of JeM inside the cantonment of Bhawalpur. If such a thing were to happen, we can expect a fast downward spiral of violence to the level of an all-out war between India and Pakistan. For now, the culpability of escalation remains with Pakistan, especially with the 21-minute continuous air strikes by India on February 26.

The Pulwama tragedy can also be expected to be a part of a larger campaign for JeM and its masters—the Pakistani army and ISI. Suicide attacks, especially those that are sponsored by a state or terrorist group, rarely happen in isolation, and are often followed up with smaller or similar intensity attacks in a limited region. The Indian Armed Forces need to be prepared for such an eventuality, and take precautions to avoid it.

When all is said and done, we need to ensure that JeM or any other terrorist group is unable to carry out any attack against Indian population on our soil, with or without the support of the “deep-state” masters of Pakistan—the Army and the ISI. While physical precautions and military action may be needed to

deter such actions, it will need psychological warfare as a part of a larger information warfare campaign. The US Army, in a document written in 1948, defines “psychological warfare” as: “[It] uses physical or moral means other than orthodox military techniques which tend to:

- Destroy the will and the ability to fight the enemy
- To deprive him of support of his allies
- To increase among our troops and those of our allies the will to conquer.”

Psychological warfare employs any weapon capable of influencing the will of the enemy. Weapons are psychological only by the effect they produce and not because of the nature of the weapons themselves.⁸ Announcements regarding “redistribution” and “diversion” of the Indus river water, of air strikes, etc., can be seen as effective examples of psychological unnerving of the Pakistani psyche.

India would therefore need to employ all white (open), grey, or black (secret) propaganda and psychological weapons in its arsenal to destroy the will of the deep state in Pakistan to launch such attacks against India. Based on an indepth knowledge of the target population, multiple narratives must be launched that would destroy the morale of terrorist organisations based in Pakistan, gain sympathy from anti-India elements against those who wish to employ violent actions against our country, and manoeuvre these narratives as per the changing needs after being “launched.”

With India’s diplomatic, economic, and military operations and actions in response to the Pulwama attack already defined and known to Pakistan, surgical strikes no longer offer the element of surprise to the deep-state establishment of Pakistan as it did in 2016. India must now demonstrate covert targeted strike capability against Pakistan. Imbalance and unpredictability can create chaos and panic in the minds of anti-India elements. Simply continuing

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with patrols and offering opportunities for peace dialogue with Pakistan is no longer sufficient. Sharp, timely response, as demonstrated by the Indian government in response to the Pulwama attack, must be continued as a state policy going

forward. Keeping the Pakistani government, deep-state apparatus as well as the general population in suspense of India's actions is the need of the hour. This is the only way to get lasting "victory" in a battlefield that is not defined.

Notes

1. Vijaita Singh, "Pulwama Attack: Probe on to trace source of explosives," *The Hindu*, February 19, 2019; accessible at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/probe-on-to-trace-source-of-explosives/article26306542.ece>
2. Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, "What happened at Pulwama and history of terror attacks on convoys," *Economic Times*, February 16, 2019; accessible at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/what-happened-at-pulwama-and-history-of-terror-attacks-on-convoys/articleshow/68019194.cms>
3. "At Latoomode of Awantipora in Pulwama, an explosive laden vehicle entered the Jammu-Srinagar highway from a left by-lane. It overtook a bus, fifth in the convoy and exploded. The bus was blown to smithereens. The sixth bus was also impacted by the blast." Ibid.
4. For instance, David Devdas' book, *The Generation of Rage in Kashmir* (OUP, 2018) discusses how the youth seems have simultaneously risen up in anger in the valley. External radicalisation has been discounted of recent. However, the Pulwama attack shows the continued influence exerted by external terrorist organisations, such as JeM.
5. For satellite imagery of the site, as well as the distances of JeM's headquarters from central military offices, see Ankit Kumar's article for *India Today* from February 16, 2019, accessible at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pulwama-terror-attack-jaish-e-mohammed-headquarters-in-pakistan-bahawalpur-india-today-exclusive-1457818-2019-02-16>
6. Geeta Mohan, "58 nations condemn Pulwama terror attack, US names Pakistan," *India Today*, February 17, 2019; accessible at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/58-nations-condemn-pulwama-terror-attack-us-names-pakistan-1457970-2019-02-17>
7. See the article at *Outlook*, "After Pulwama Terror Attack, 2,500 Kashmiri Youth Apply for 111 Vacancies In Army," February 20, 2019; accessible at: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-kashmiri-youth-send-clear-message-to-pak-amid-pulwama-attack-sign-up-for-army-in-record-numbers/325835>
8. These notes on psychological warfare, including those on the US Army instructions on the matter, are taken from a LinkedIn post by D. Steponevicius titled, "From the history of Psyops."

The contents of this Issue Brief are based on the analysis of material accessed from open sources and are the personal views of the author. It may not be quoted as representing the views or policy of the Government of India or Integrated Headquarters of MoD (Army).



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