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Internationalisation- The Next Phase of Kashmir Conflict

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Abstract

The next phase of Kashmir conflict will be its internationalisation. Over the last 70 years, it has largely remained a localized conflict zone. However, social, political cultural and religious developments over the last decade have paved a way for the penetration of pan-Islamist attitudes in Kashmir's society. Wahhabism had made deep inroads since 2011. Militancy has taken a West Asian turn in tactics and ideology. Several international state actors have become involved in Kashmir. Further, the recent abrogation of the special status of Kashmir and its fallouts, visible in the global diplomatic platforms and media has fastened the process of the internationalisation of Kashmir issue. Lastly, with the change in India policy from "strategic restraint" to "zero tolerance to terror," there is a strong likelihood of a major security crisis in the event of any major terrorist strike in India by a Pakistan-based terrorist group which will compel the world powers to intervene in a significant way.

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1. Introduction

Kashmir stands at a critical juncture, ready to embark onto the next stage of the conflict- its "internationalisation." Over the last 70 years, it more or less remained a localized conflict zone. Peace activists, human rights workers, and diplomats across the globe did not perceive Kashmir in the same way as they perceived Palestine and Gaza -although after India and Pakistan acquired nuclear power, occasionally, Kashmir did generate ripples in the western media and world capitals. However, the abrogation of Kashmir's special status in August 2019 has given an impetus to the process of "internationalisation". The western media and think tank worlds are replete with news and developments in Kashmir. Op-eds on Kashmir have appeared in the most reputed newspapers and magazines such as Foreign Policy, the New York Times, the Guardian and the Washington Post. Most recently, Dexter Filkin's [New Yorker Essay](#) on Kashmir's Human Rights situation and communications lock down after the abrogation of article 370 has already become viral on Twitter across the globe. The truth may be debatable; however, and unquestionably, the narrative that the essay brings forth presents India in a bad light and raises serious questions on its democratic credentials. Seminars and conferences on Kashmir, and India's security and communication lockdown in post-370 Kashmir, have become common. India's Kashmir move has figured prominently in the [UNSC](#), the [UNGA](#), and the [UNHRC](#). Most recently, Democrat Pramila Jay Pal and Republican Steve Watkins brought a [bipartisan resolution](#) into the US House of Representatives. The resolution asks India to end the restrictions on communications and mass detentions while acknowledging the security threats faced by India from cross-border terrorism. Though India successfully managed to avert any UN resolutions, the process of the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue has received a significant boost.

Kashmir today, more than ever, reflects alarming levels of alienation, depression, and mental acceptance - in the overwhelming majority of the cases, out of fatigue and fear - of the end of the region's special status - the last symbol of its distinct cultural identity in the popular imagination. However, closer strategic scrutiny also reveals that the deracination of attitudes, beliefs, and cultural patterns were building up over the last decade (Pandya, 2019). The alienation and detachment regarding everything 'local' are providing space to Pan-Islamist attitudes in society in all the areas of collective existence. This passage into the next phase of conflict is

holistic – all-around, both subtle and overt. In the future, it is likely to progress in degrees and manifest itself in a variety of ways. Kashmir is likely to be firmly placed under the powerful scanner of global media, human rights activists, think tanks and intellectuals – which will transform previous debates into discussions in multi-lateral forums and end either in resolutions, peace interlocutors or in the extreme case, in the peace-keeping forces on the ground. This essay will explore this process of internationalisation- causal factors, the journey, and the future scenario.

2. Widespread Alienation

Kashmir analysts widely agree that New Delhi in recent years has been mostly following a highly security-centric approach in dealing with the Post-Burhan Wani (2016 onwards) phase of militancy in the Kashmir Valley. This approach has been amazingly successful if we look at the number of militants neutralized; [270 in 2018 124 this year up to June](#). However, New Delhi's muscular policy has also resulted in extraordinarily high levels of alienation and resentment against India, previously not witnessed in Kashmir. **Moreover, since 2014, the targets of alienation and hatred reach beyond the government of India and its security forces. With a rising Hindu nationalism and hateful depiction of Kashmiris on India's mainstream electronic media, the resentment and hatred has taken a communal turn and it is increasingly becoming anti-Indian and anti-Hindu.** It is particularly manifest in the form of public defiance during operations by security forces- and the fact that militants gather considerable public support was evidenced in large scale stone-pelting during the CASO (Cordon and Search Operations), which was aimed at rescuing trapped militants from the encounter site.

Further, the resentment doesn't only target Delhi itself. Even the Kashmiri mainstream political parties and the politicians stand discredited because of corruption, dubious loyalties towards both Pakistan and India, nepotism, mal-governance, and their public image of being Delhi's puppets. In the 2019 parliamentary election, in former Chief Minister Mahboba Mufti's Anantnag constituency, final voter turnout was less than [2.88%](#), a clear manifestation of the prevailing alienation. Loss of credibility was also evident when people rejoiced over their [arrest and detention](#) before the abrogation of article 370. Above all, the political and bureaucratic leadership's diminishing 'connection' with common Kashmiris, particularly the youth, and the

lack of civil society initiatives are significantly responsible for this clear loss of credibility. The youth feels that the mainstream political parties had thus far thrived on blackmailing both India and Pakistan and fooling the masses for petty political and monetary gains. Even the separatist Hurriyat (APHC) has been exposed like never before - as an opportunistic entity living off the blood of ordinary Kashmiris and the money doled out by India and Pakistan's deep states. (Pandya, 2019, pp. 6-10). In a parallel development, one can also witness a great extent of disappointment with Pakistan. The younger generation feels that Pakistan's primary interests are driven by geopolitics and water-security and not related to Kashmiris themselves or their honour and aspirations.

Finally, add the abrogation of article 370, and a circle of alienation is completed. Even though a vast majority still has no clear idea of the constituents of article 370 – or the fact that it was denuded of its strength back in the 1960s - in popular perception, it still exists as sacrosanct-untouchable - last guard of Kashmir's cultural identity. However, it is pertinent to mention here that over the last three decades, the most significant harm to Kashmir's syncretic traditions and refined cultural ethos has come from the Pakistan-sponsored Islamist terrorism and extremist Wahhabi radicalization (Pandya, 2019, pp. 103-118). Over the last 70 years, mainstream politicians have projected article 370 as the legitimate bridge between India and Kashmir and also a reminder of Kashmir's autonomous identity vis-à-vis India's other states. These politicians have also projected themselves as the protectors of article 370. Now that this overinflated article 370 is gone, the rift between Delhi and Srinagar - which was already quite severe - seems to have widened to a point of no-return. Currently, there is an enormous level of resentment and simmering discontent across society. Ordinary citizens living in an extraordinarily radicalized milieu fear that their voice will become irrelevant after the colonization of the area by non-Muslim outsiders. The increasingly dominant presence of Hindu Nationalism in all institutions of the state and society and the accompanying perception of the marginalization of minorities within secular India is adding fuel to these fears and resentment.

In the meantime, mainstream politicians facing a colossal credibility crisis have come to an untimely political irrelevance. Though the mainstream political process in Kashmir always carried a taint of constituting a sophisticated sham well-orchestrated by India's deep state, it still provided a number of platforms for funnelling the citizenry's political aspirations. With its

demise after the article 370 was revoked, all forms of political engagement seem to have come to a dead-end in a society which was already showing alarming levels of alienation and radicalization. The leadership vacuum created will most likely be filled by pan-Islamist forces and Transnational Terrorist Groups (TTGs).

3. Build-up to the Next stage (2006-2019) – Internationalisation

The early signs vaguely indicating the influence of global Islamism were visible from 2006 onwards. Kashmir witnessed a phenomenon - hitherto unknown to the local populace and the security forces - of mass public protests using Palestinian-style, Intifada-like stone-pelting as a potent weapon against said security forces. By 2006-07, the various peace and confidence-building initiatives taken during the [Vajpayee-Musharraf dialogue \(Agra Summit\)](#) and continued by the successor Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) regime had already begun to fizzle out due to a multitude of factors. In the state, though the PDP-Congress alliance¹ had been successful in crushing the backbone of militancy- with many top commanders eliminated - a silent streak of discontent was simmering beneath the surface. The absence of a visible and sincere political process to both compensate and complement the harsh armed crackdown on militancy was primarily responsible for this.

The period also witnessed a number of unrelated but significant incidents, such as the unrest that followed the transfer of forest land to the [Amaranth Shrine board](#) (Hindu shrine) in 2008, the death of two Kashmiri girls [Asia and Nilopher](#) under suspicious circumstances (though security forces were blamed for their rape and murder, the circumstances betrayed more sinister objectives on the part of separatists and their Pakistan-based supporters), and the death of [Tufail Mattoo](#) (2010) in the course of a public protest. The Hurriyat continued to spread hatred, angst, and resentment to the core of society. The separatist sentiment hitherto confined to Srinagar and the urban areas was, for the first time, seen spreading to rural areas.

These incidents happened at the same time as the Arab world was going through the Arab Spring. The socio-political turmoil in the Arab World made its way into Kashmiri minds. When

¹ People's Democratic Party is a Kashmiri mainstream political party led by Mahbooba Mufti, with soft-separatist tendencies and the massive support of the Pro-Pakistan radical Islamist organization Jamaat-i-Islami and its lay followers in Kashmir.

the Government of India hanged [Afzal Guru](#) (accused in the attack on the Indian Parliament) in 2013, there were repercussions among the Kashmiri youth occupying Lal Chowk (Srinagar) and staging Tahrir Square-like massive protests and demonstrations. However, fortunately, unrest was contained through the right combination of diplomacy and hardball tactics by some very competent police officers. Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp and twitter) and the internet played an instrumental role in disseminating the news and the Pan-Islamist ideology among Kashmir's youth.

The following year, in 2014, the people voted in large numbers (66% voting) (Economic Times, 2014) because they had huge expectations from the BJP to continue with the Vajpayee's legacy (dialogue and reconciliation- although the lack of sincerity and honesty by Pakistan and its proxy separatist leadership in Kashmir was always visible) and put forward definitive ideas for the resolution of the Kashmir issue. However, soon the initial enthusiasm started turning into a sense of disappointment as the tidings of mostly negative and exaggerated narratives of sporadic incidents of 'beef-lynching' and Hindu extremism reached Kashmir. The atmosphere was further embittered by the 24X7 national media tirade, maligning all Kashmiris as terrorists. As a result, PM Modi's charm, too, started losing its sheen with the Kashmiris, who now believed that the central government wanted only to follow a muscular approach in the region.

Then came the PDP-BJP (the ruling Hindu-nationalist party in the centre) alliance government in the state with which people felt 'a bit cheated' with as the PDP had sought their votes in return for keeping the Hindu-nationalist-BJP and its parent organization RSS out of the state. The alliance could still have been achieved but for the untimely death of the veteran politician, then CM, Mufti Sayeed. Additionally, the PDP's policy of appeasement towards the separatists, stone-palters, and militants for petty political gains, was compromising the national security at an alarming level. Finally, the death of popular HM commander Burhan Wani in an encounter with the security forces in 2016 led to massive civil unrest in Kashmir. Ordinary civilians came out in large numbers throwing stones at the security forces and expressing solidarity with the militants. Since then, significantly, Kashmir continued to witness an intense phase of brutal, mostly home-grown militancy - mainly centred in South Kashmir.

Such course of events ultimately set the stage for the next phase of the conflict in Kashmir. With a profoundly entrenched alienation regarding both India and Pakistan, the stage seems set for a smooth transition into the next phase wherein young minds of Kashmir are bracketing a hitherto localized regional conflict zone with the happenings in Palestine and Gaza. These young minds, it may be noted, are the children of conflict (born in the 90s and after) and do not share the very sentimental memories of Kashmiriyat- the liberal and syncretic Sufi form of Islam that worships saints and tombs and shares many practices with local Hinduism. They are more likely to find anchorage in foreign ideas, beliefs, and cultural patterns. In a society undergoing intense Jihadi radicalization, such external sources of anchorage lie in the notion of Pan-Islamism. Hereunder, the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue has started happening as a process with one stage logically paving the way for the other. The process is unravelling in various ways, at many levels, and in different realms, as explained below.

4. Indicators of the emergent Internationalisation

a. Religious and Cultural Domains

Beginning with the cultural and religious domains, the rapid spread of Saudi-funded Salafism in the state has laid a firm groundwork for the Arabization of the local Islam, culture, and Kashmiri psyche. In 2011, out of 8 million Muslims, there are about [1.5 million](#) Salafi followers. The number of Salafis has been rapidly on the rise over the last two decades, and the growth has been exponential since 2011. Salafi mosques built in Arabic style with minarets have mushroomed in the valley in the last decade (now numbering 700). Salafi Imams are paid much better as compared to the Imams of Etaqadi mosques. Generous scholarships await many local youngsters who wish to pursue Islamic studies in the Arab World. As a result, Kashmiryat (the local variant of liberal Sufi Islam with many Hindu practices) is taking the worst hit. Of late, with the arrival of puritanical doctrines of Salafism and Jihadi radicalization, the young generation, already severely exposed to a violent conflict of three decades, has lost interest in the charm of mild and pacific Sufi spiritualism (Pandya,2019, pp. 103-121). Several incidents of burning Sufi shrines have come to light. [Sectarian rivalries](#) are also surfacing between Etaqadis (local Sufi Muslims) and Salafis (Wahhabis are known as Salafis and Ahl-i-Hadith in Kashmir). In December 2018, a group of IS supporting Wahhabi Muslims vandalized the [pulpit of the Jamia](#)

[Mosque](#), the seat of the Mirwaiz to deliver Friday sermons. After the incident, the mosque was fenced with barbed wire to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. In an informal conversation with Waheed Zargar (name changed), a resident of downtown Srinagar and an active volunteer in Jamia Mosque, one could sense a hidden fear for the worst, i.e., the possibility of the bombing of Etaqadi gatherings in Jamia mosque for Friday prayers by ISJK or AGuH terrorists (the ISJK is the Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir, the local affiliate of IS – without a *bayat* link; the AGuH is Ansar Gahzwat-ul-Hind, the local affiliate of Al Qaeda. Both decry local Sufi Islam and its practices such as shrine worshipping and advocate fundamentalist Wahhabism). With an increasing Arab influence, the tendency to equate the Kashmir situation with the Palestine issue and the overall scenario in the Middle East is finding greater traction among both lay followers of Islam and extremists in Kashmir. With such a mind-set, Israel, India, and the US are seen as 'enemies', and Pakistan, Turkey, China – and also these days Russia, to some extent due to its increasing proximity with Pakistan - are trusted as 'friends'.

One can also witness an element of cultural change percolating in society. As recently as in 2004-05, it was quite uncommon to find girls wearing Burqas in the Kashmir University, but now it's getting difficult to spot even a single girl without Burqa or a Hijab. The casual discussions on the roadside tea shops, eateries and the college campuses hover around the necessity of political Islam and global jihad to save Islam. Often the young minds are seen engaging in intense debates about the plight of Muslims in other parts of the world, including China and Myanmar. On condition of anonymity, a political science professor admitted that when he mentioned India as a secular democratic republic in a Masters level class (2018) on India's constitution, the students showered a barrage of questions protesting the use of the word "secular." Several students even went to the extent of saying that the very idea of secularism was Un-Islamic!

In a casual visit to downtown Srinagar, the author asked ordinary citizens - some of which included stone-palters and former militants - about the impact of the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan. In unison, they replied, “*hamare Taliban Afghani bhai yaha aakar hamare haq me jang karenge or dilliki Kafir hukumat ko sabaq sikhayenge*”(Our Taliban and Afghan brothers will come here and fight a battle against Delhi’s government run by the infidels). Even in rural areas with bad connectivity, the people displayed impressive knowledge of the geopolitical events related to pan-Islamism. The author interacted with a group of 10th grade students (16-18 years)

in school run by the supposedly pro-India National Conference in Budgam (Central Kashmir). The issue regarded the future of Kashmiri Pundits (local residents who were forced to migrate from Kashmir by Pakistan-backed Islamists in 1990) and Rohingya Muslims who have recently taken refuge in some parts of Kashmir. In a class of 50 students, 40 elements supported the settlement of Rohingyas because they were Muslims. Moreover, they were bitterly against the resettlement of Kashmiri pundits. When the author enquired a little more, some of them started abusing the author as Modi's stooge.

b. Global Islamism influencing young minds

The new generation increasingly tends to see Kashmiri issues through the prism of global Islamism. This phenomenon was entirely unheard of before 2010. There appears to be a gradual consciousness shift among the youth from India-Pakistan centred concerns to the concerns centred on global Islamism. We even witness a shift in self-perception. A strong thread of loyalty is felt to the Ummah, the universal Islamic brotherhood. In their geographical area of residence i.e., Kashmir, youths perceive themselves as the flag-bearers of Global Islamism. They often analyse local issues from the standpoint of an oppressed Muslim Ummah suspecting a severe threat to its identity from all quarters. Despite a rich shared history and an intense bond of cultural connection with India, Kashmiris are today orienting more towards such foreign ideas and beliefs.

While the young college-going students outwardly appear to be quite liberal and cosmopolitan, rather unexpectedly, they display a keen awareness of and fascination for global Islamism. For many, Baghdadi and Osama bin Laden have acquired the status of heroes. Most of them saw the ouster of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Morsi from power as an affront to Islam and democracy. They display a worldview wherein all the 'lofty ideals' of secularism, multiculturalism, democracy, human rights, and liberty have to align themselves with the supreme interests of Islamism. Besides, while expressing a strong desire to study Human Rights, Public Policy, International Relations, and conflict studies in American and European Universities, their imaginations have less in common with the youth from Delhi and Mumbai. A large number of the Kashmiri students visit Turkey, Central Asia, Pakistan and Bangladesh for higher studies where they are poached upon by Pakistan's deep state and the members of

Jamaat-I-Islami. Often such higher studies programs are facilitated by Pakistan's deep state and in many cases, have been used for terror financing. It's not only the colleges and universities. Public schools and government schools in Kashmir have become the hotbeds of Wahhabi extremism. Islamist organizations like the Jamaat and Ahl-i-Hadith (Wahhabis are known as Salafis and Ahl-i-Hadith in Kashmir) own large number of schools (Jamaat alone owns 10,000 schools according to unofficial sources) and have a robust penetration in government schools. They teach an extremist and radicalized discourse on religion.

The young generation tends to align with the students of other conflict-ridden societies such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Myanmar and Syria. Again, such trends are new. The earliest signs of this phenomenon were seen in after 2010 during the Arab Spring but came up with a higher intensity after the 2016 civil unrest that followed the encounter-death of a popular militant commander, Burhan Wani. The overwhelming majority of teenagers and college/University students strongly supported Burhan Wani and Zakir Musa and their goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Kashmir. The youth in Kashmir shows an impressive awareness and enthusiasm for geopolitical events of West Asia as compared to the young minds of the same age group in other parts of India. The youth in Kashmir perceive Muslims of West Asia as their Muslim brethren, falling in the category of "us", facing identity threats from all anti-Islamic forces and India - "them" - as one of the many regimes oppressing Muslims. They have a better connection, and robust faith in international dailies such as Al Jazeera, Turkey's official broadcasting service TRT World, the NYT, the Guardian, and the Economist than in any Indian mainstream dailies (which they do not find credible).

c. Militancy taking a West Asian turn in tactics and ideology

In ideological terms, Kashmir's youth is experiencing a gradual shift towards a political Islam/caliphate ideology (to establish a sharia-ruled Islamic caliphate in Kashmir). After the Pulwama *fedayeen* incident (February 14, 2019), the drift in the nature of militancy is also becoming more pronounced towards Syria-Iraq-styled *fedayeen* and IED attacks, as evidenced in some of the recent incidents of terrorist violence. However, it may be hurriedly added that the incidents of IED and *fedayeen* attacks should not be the sole reason to conclude that Kashmir militancy is now taking a Middle Eastern trajectory. The recent incidents of *fedayeen* and IED

appear more like a change of tactics - even though we do indeed witness a move closer to IS-style attacks in Iraq-Syria, albeit without being closely aligned to the 'general guidelines' issued from time to time by ISIS. The young boys willing to become *fedayees* and using IEDs for perpetrating terror incidents do not present a clear ISIS-styled Islamist mind-set. The search for status and identity seems to be a work in progress. Though an undercurrent of Jihadi radicalization is present, the main sentiment is still about Azadi - or in other words, a Pakistan-centric movement. The attacks are still mainly directed against the SFs (Security Forces), refraining from targeting civilians and minorities. However, this should not lull India's security apparatus into a belief that the trends of global Islamists are not influencing the militants' activities. The constituency for the caliphate mind-set is gradually expanding in Kashmir, especially in central Kashmir.

After 2010 and especially after the Burhan Wani encounter in 2016, youths, particularly in South Kashmir, have been exposed to a high level of radicalization. Jaish-e-Muhammad, a hard-core radical Islamist terrorist organization, has made deep inroads in that area as is being seen in the number of encounters happening there involving JeM terrorists. Ideologically, the JeM is akin to the Taliban, and as observed in other cases, it is likely to pave the way for transnational terror outfits like AQ and ISIS. Downtown Srinagar appears to be emerging as a hub of ISIS ideology. Al Qaeda and ISIS already have their local affiliates in the form of the Ansar Gahzwat-ul-Hind (AGuH) and the Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK). Zakir Musa, the renegade commander of Pakistan-supported Hizbul Mujahidin (HM), left HM and formed AGuH. Zakir Musa was massively popular among teenagers and youths. His message was clear- the fight in Kashmir is not for any political independence but for Allah to establish a sharia-ruled Islamic caliphate. The spread of the IS-ideology is mostly spread through popular social media (Telegram). Also, one can find a unique similarity between ISIS cadres from Europe and the Middle East and ISIS sympathizers in Kashmir. Like [foreign fighters joining ISIS from Europe](#), the new-age terrorists in Kashmir are also facing an identity crisis-cum-psychological depression. They are the least knowledgeable about Islam, unemployed and deep in drugs, women, and alcohol. They are looking for an anchorage, an assuring identity and a feeling of redemption which they believe to find in pan-Islamism and the Jihad. Thus, due to the overall vacuum-political and economic- and the alienation and depression among the citizenry, the TTGs are likely to find a firm foothold in Kashmir in the future. In the last six months, one can witness

significant outreach efforts by the TTGs in Kashmir. In July 2019, IS chief Baghdadi announced Kashmir as one of the [IS' wilayat](#). AQ chief Zawahiri released an audio message in July 2019, calling upon the Kashmiris for '[united jihad](#)'. Capitalizing upon the budding sympathy for Islamism, distrust for Pakistan and hatred for India, he [stated](#) "that Kashmir is a bleeding wound in our hearts.....a tragedy made even direr by the fact that they are caught between Hindu brutality on one hand and the treachery and conspiracies of Pakistan's intelligence agencies on the other hand".

In this context, it is also worth mentioning that the ISKP (Islamic State of Khorasan Province) seems to have established itself as a force in Eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. After US withdrawal - if and when it happens as part of the elusive Afghan peace deal - its position would likely become stronger. Some Indians from the state of Kerala area are already there, having joined the ISKP. That could become, in times ahead, the nucleus for attracting Kashmiri youth. Unsurprisingly, ISIS has already declared Kashmir as one of its 'provinces'. The youngsters and teenagers in the Kashmir valley showed a keen interest in Baghdadi's recent video. For Pakistan, the cover of ISKP will serve two purposes- first, it would offer deniability, much needed in the face of increasing FATF pressure; second, it would help sustain the militancy, which is facing fatigue and shortage of funds and weapons. The crucial question here is whether Pakistan would like to include Kashmir militancy, a radical Islamist movement controlled by external forces espousing the caliphate agenda.

Pakistan's strategy has always been to keep firm control over militant groups in Kashmir by sustaining their dependency on Pakistan for funds, logistics, weapons, intelligence, narrative building cyber ops, and training. So far, it has had absolute leverage with the militant groups in Kashmir. If it can have a similar arrangement with the TTGs, Pakistan will facilitate their entrenchment in Kashmir. In return, the TTGs will benefit from Pakistan's vast resources and assets in Kashmir.

d. The increasing involvement by global state actors- Turkey, Iran, and China

The other sign of internationalisation is the growing involvement of Turkey in Kashmiri affairs. Informed Kashmiri strategists maintain the [Turkish authorities](#) are making systematic attempts to woo clerics, the business community, and intellectuals in Kashmir. Several young Kashmiri

scholars are found writing opinion pieces about the human rights situation and rise of Hindu nationalism in Kashmir in Turkey's official magazine, the TRT World. However, their quality and factual content on Kashmir make it amply clear that these write-ups are primarily designed as anti-India propaganda, mischievously hiding the truth and misquoting facts and incidents in a spiteful hate campaign for sinister geopolitical objectives. Turkey, under the Islamist spell of 'Erdoganism', is making a special appeal to the Kashmiri intellectual class by overtly emphasizing human rights as well as political and humanitarian issues. However, the real motive is to peddle a hidden Islamist agenda, extremely dangerous to the Kashmiriyat. It may be mentioned here that Turkey is offering scholarships to Kashmiri students. Jamaat-i-Islami, the banned radical Islamist organization and the social front of the militant outfit HM, has secure connections with Turkey. Its chief Amir has reportedly made several visits to Turkey and even claims to have met President Erdogan. The detailed exploration of Turkish involvement in Kashmir calls for a separate discussion; suffice it to mention here that Turkey is likely to play in the future a more active role in the socio-cultural, political and intellectual life of Kashmir. Also, the resistance to Erdogan's caliphate ambitions by the Israel-Saudi camp (UAE, Kuwait) and the not-so-distant US-Iran face-off in the Middle East will make Erdogan more dependent on the subcontinent's Muslims for supporting his claim to said caliphate. An active outreach to Muslims in India will be witnessed (it is already happening at an impressive scale) and hence more involvement in the internal issues of Kashmir - and increased attempts to humiliate India in international forums. Erdogan has raised the Kashmir issue in many global platforms. The OIC has also appointed a special envoy for Kashmir. After the revocation of Kashmir's special status, Turkey came up as the most [ardent supporter](#) of Pakistan on Kashmir. The TRT World is playing an instrumental role in shaping the global discourse on Kashmir- projecting it as a major humanitarian crisis theatre and a global conflict on the lines of Palestine, fighting a separatist movement against "fascist" and "colonial Hindu-nationalist Indian government". It carried umpteen numbers of fabricated articles and video programs on Kashmir intended to build an anti-India narrative on the article 370 issue. Erdogan, while addressing an event named "[Combating Hate Speech](#)" -co-hosted by Pakistan and Turkey on the side-lines of the UNGA- said referring to J&K that the "world should know the sufferings of Kashmir." He likened the situation of Kashmir to Palestine, adding that eight million Kashmiris are braving Indian atrocities in an open-air prison on their territory.

Further, he [denounced](#) violence by Hindu extremists against Muslims in India for beef-consumption, urging respect for freedom and faith. "Turkey is resolved to defend the rights of Muslims living in Jammu and Kashmir," said Erdogan. He also urged all the international institutions, NGOs, technology companies, state institutions, media, and educational institutions to come forward and resolve the dispute. The author's informed interlocutors have confirmed that Turkey's long-term objective is to internationalise the Kashmiri issue and play the role of a mediator.

Another primary concern is the increasing penetration of China in Kashmir. It is not directly perceptible, but it can be felt in many ways. A large number of Kashmiri students are visiting China for higher studies. China's sympathy with Jaish-e-Muhammad, which has been responsible for some of the most horrifying acts of terror in Kashmir, including the Pulwama *fedayeen* attack, hardly needs any elaboration. On many occasions, China has blocked UN resolutions to declare Jaish chief Masood Azhar a global terrorist. Apart from this, a large number of Kashmiris see China's CPEC as an excellent opportunity for economic prosperity, employment, trade, and global connectivity. The majority of them hold the view that India must join the CPEC. India's recent move in Kashmir has unsettled China. In a parallel development to the abolition of Kashmir's special status, it also divided the State of Jammu and Kashmir into the two centrally-controlled union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, with the supplementary region of Ladakh. Allegedly, in 1962, China illegally occupied [Aksai Chin](#), a part of Ladakh. China ambitions claims on Ladakh. It has thus objected to India's move in a territory which is allegedly a disputed one. Moreover, Pakistan presented [Shaksgam valley](#) a part of Kashmir illegally occupied by Islamabad in 1947 - to China in 1963. China's [CPEC](#) passes through the Shaksgam valley and Gilgit-Baltistan. Hence, China has substantial stakes in Kashmir and it will be keenly interested in the emerging geopolitical dynamics of the region.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, it was continuing with a high decibel campaign in favour of the resumption of talks with India before the abrogation of article 370. Though it made an explicit intent to dismantle the terror camps in PoK, in effect, these were empty rhetoric exercises. There was never any sincere desire on its part to initiate any verifiable action against its India-specific terror outfits. Pakistan's hasty peace overtures arose from its weak economic condition, looming FATF sanctions, and the global mandate against terrorism. India's deft diplomacy also has

isolated and compelled Pakistan to fall in line. Interestingly China has also [accepted](#) the Indian demand to proscribe Masood Azhar as an international terrorist. It has also not displayed much enthusiasm for Pakistan's attempts to internationalise the Kashmir issue.

Last but not least, another interesting facet in the overall process of internationalisation of the Kashmir campaign that deserves to be mentioned here is the fact that the [Kashmiri Shia community](#) is increasingly orienting itself towards Iran. In Kargil and other Shia-dominated areas, one can see large hoardings of the Iranian leader Khamani. Iranian clerics and scholars have been making frequent visits to Kashmir. Young Shia students visit Shia seminaries in both Iran and Iraq. The author also met some Shia youth who claimed having fought against ISIS in Fallujah and Mosul. Some of them proudly admit to having established contact with the Hezbollah! Kashmir is fast becoming a battleground for Middle Eastern sectarian rivalries. Earlier in the paper, the author mentioned Saudi and Turkey's involvement. The changing geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East are resonating in Kashmir. However, detailed analyses of these issues can be taken up separately.

5. Abrogation of article 370 and its impact on the internationalisation of the Kashmiri issue

After the abrogation of article 370, the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue received a significant boost. Disregarding India's scepticism to third-party mediation on the Kashmir issue in the past, [US President Donald Trump offered](#) to mediate between India and Pakistan twice. India has been extremely guarded about keeping the bilateral nature of the dispute intact. Hence, it took serious offense at Trump's offer, which, as many strategic experts in India believe, and not so without reason, was aimed at placating Pakistan in lieu of its support in the upcoming US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Then, suddenly western Media started writing profusely about the security and communication lockdown in Kashmir, casting strong aspersions on India's democratic credentials. The situation had become quite embarrassing for India, and it had to put forward a robust defence in both the UNHRC and UNSC. [Six American lawmakers](#) wrote to the Indian embassy registering their protest against the security and communication lockdown in Kashmir. There were two congressional hearings in which India's interlocutor Arti Tikoo Singh with her poor homework was no match for Prof. Nitasha Kaul, who had come well-prepared

with her research. The allegations were becoming so embarrassing that the Modi government had to give a [guided tour](#) of Kashmir to the [right-wing MPs](#) of the European Union.

The revocation of article 370 is a massive blow to Pakistan's terror infrastructure in Kashmir. For the Pakistani army, Kashmir is an existential issue for keeping its monopoly over state power intact and amassing a disproportionately high share of the national budget. The author has outlined the dependence of the Pakistani army on the Kashmir issue and its psyche on the question of Kashmir in his essay, "[A Realistic Understanding of Pakistan](#)". Plus, it also fears losing credibility with its proxy actors in Kashmir, who for years projected Pakistan as the champion of Kashmir and Islam. On the other side, Delhi is likely to continue its harsh crackdown on terror in Kashmir. All the channels of dialogue between India and Pakistan and internally with the separatist leaders of Kashmir appear to have become a matter of distant past. That being said, Pakistan is left with the only option of internationalizing the Kashmir issue. In order to do that, it prefers to a) keep the borders on the boil to scare western powers with the fear of escalation and nuclear Armageddon, b) orchestrate a major terrorist attack with high optics, either in Kashmir or in the other cities of India.

Before 2014, India showed a "strategic restraint" in its response to such acts. However, the Modi government policy is of zero tolerance to terror. Over the last five years of Modi's government, India's policy change from "Strategic Restraint" to "zero tolerance on terror" was explicitly evident in India's response in the form of a surgical strike and Balakot airstrikes to the Uri *fedayeen* attack and the Pulwama *fedayeen* attack respectively.

In the future, if a Pakistan-based terror group executes a major terrorist attack in India, there is a strong possibility of India retaliating with Balakot-styled airstrikes or Missile strikes on the terrorist training camps in the PoK. Also, lately, Pakistan's ministers have given blatant nuclear threats. On India's side, the defence minister, the army chief, and the Foreign minister have expressed intent to conquer Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. Further, India's ongoing economic slowdown and the internal protest against the government may motivate it to pursue an aggressive foreign policy vis-à-vis Pakistan.

That said, India's retaliation to terror strikes may escalate into full-fledged military action or even a war between the two countries. In a war-like situation, the local population in Kashmir may erupt into civil unrest - likely to result in massive human casualties. In such a milieu, there is a strong possibility of a significant international intervention in Kashmir, which may be in the form of the UN resolutions, peace interlocutors, or, at worst, the deployment of the peacekeeping forces. India may end up annexing a small part, maybe up to Muzaffarabad (capital of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) or even a smaller portion of Kashmir; however, in the long run, global powers including Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, US, Russia and China are likely to be significantly involved.

6. Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, the author outlined the early but worrying symptoms of the creeping internationalisation of the Kashmir issue. At this stage, however, it would appear a bit far-fetched to attempt providing a long-term strategic forecast. This is so because the mainstream political parties in the state are facing an existential crisis. The Hurriyat leadership is facing a slow extinction. Militancy, too, has taken a severe hit in the last three years. There are only about 300 active militants (unofficial sources suggest about 1200 due to infiltration after the abrogation of article 370), nothing compared to the situation in the 90s (when they used to be in the thousands).

However, public support for militancy is at an unprecedented level, especially after the abrogation of article 370. Though the population is depressed and exhausted with the conflict, alarming levels of alienation were further strengthened by the repeal of article 370, and the security-cum-communication lockdown is a primary worrying concern. It seems that the current almost insignificance of the Hurriyat Conference (non-violent separatist political group) and mainstream political parties have left no 'middle-ground' left to speak of. It is either for India or against India, now. Given the alarming levels of alienation, one can imagine the strength of both pro and anti-India constituencies. **Further in such an anti-India milieu, Delhi's aim of creating a new nationalist political class and usher in economic development through investment has a dismal future. At worst, there hardly appears to be any policy capable of putting these ideas into action.**

The fatigue and depression among the citizenry will not last long - but the anger and hatred will persist. People will recoup, and unless there is a sincere intent to address the alienation, the reaction may be visible in the form of more intense and better organized/channelled civil disobedience and human rights-activism - ultimately concurring towards the process of internationalisation of the conflict with more rhetoric and action in multilateral diplomatic forums, opinion pieces in international dailies and seminars on Kashmir in global think tanks.

To conclude, India continues to enjoy a robust international stature in terms of much stronger diplomatic and political clout today, strong enough to prevent and counter any propaganda campaign and embarrassment at multilateral platforms. However, the attitudes at the grassroots level are changing in Kashmir. In brief, religious extremists are moving towards Pan-Islamism, and the once relatively secular-liberal youth has started seeing the conflict as one among many global humanitarian, political, and human rights crises. Such an ideological, cultural, and attitudinal shift is a significant cause for concern.

Note

In several instances, the author has not revealed the identities of his interlocutors and the specific names of the institutions because of possible security threats from militant organizations.

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