

Chapter 5 :Options

India and Pakistan have currently chosen to ignore the fire between them. It is much more convenient to concentrate on a neatly defined issue like Jammu & Kashmir, while fires are being lit all over the landscape behind us. The US, Europe and other members of the international community are always in search of conflicts they can resolve. It also suits them to ignore the fires and just look at one flame. However fires once ignited spread on their own. Whether one looks at them or not, fires consume all, including those who light them. Under the circumstances, India and Pakistan do not have the choice of inaction; instead they have only two options.

Playing With Fire

The option presently pursued is to play with fire and hope that while others are burnt, the ones who light the fires are saved. This option is perceived to be pragmatic if the process of ignition is handled in a calibrated manner, and when necessary balanced with dodging fires in places where it gets too hot or too close.

The policy of playing with fire is based on the systematic strengthening of jihadi groups. It also involves temporarily closing, shifting and transforming them. This strategy was introduced by General Zia in the 1980s. It has been strengthened since January 2000, coincidentally within three months of General Pervez Musharraf's dismissal of the elected government of Pakistan. It was perfected in January 2002. There are indications that it will be taken to an even higher level of sophistication in 2005.

Soon after General Musharraf took over as Chief Executive in October 1999, an Indian Airlines aeroplane was hijacked. Maulana Masood Azhar was released in return for airline passengers held as hostages at Kandahar. He established a new organization, Jaish-e-Mohammed, which began flourishing by March 2000 under the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf. The newly formed group took over the assets of Harkat-ul Mujahideen with ease. It also recruited boys openly from the government schools. It emerged as a star among terrorist organizations and enjoyed this position until 9/11. Since then, due to its close links with the Taliban and Pakistan's cooperation with the US in the war on terror, it has been lying low. It has been formally banned; nevertheless all its assets are intact. Its recruitment and fund-raising drive is currently on. The JeM leadership claimed to have 300,000 members in 2003, two years after the war on terror was launched, though this might be an exaggeration. Maulana Massood Azhar is at large.

In January 2002, General Musharraf announced on television that Pakistan would not allow its territory to be used for terrorism. His government arrested a few thousand members of militant groups and quietly released them in March 2002. He also announced that a Madaris Ordinance would be introduced by March 23, 2002. However, the Ordinance has not been announced as of March 2005. General Musharraf banned terrorist groups including SSP, LJP and LeT. The three groups have become more active and currently enjoy 'star' status, now that JeM is under wraps. General Musharraf never even pretended to ban Hizbul Mujahideen. This group continues to be active, though it is as yet restricted to Kashmir. Some of the recent public statements by the leaders of Hizbul Mujahideen indicate their plan to extend the span of their activities from Jammu & Kashmir to other parts of India. SSP and LJP have stepped up their attacks on the Shi'a community. The LeT has been busy with 'defence of religion' public conferences, taking its recruitment and fundraising to new heights. The combined membership of SSP, LJP, LeT, HM and JeM has swollen to anywhere between 300,000 and 500,000 between General Musharraf's famous address in January 2002 and January 2005.

The only organization, which has suffered at the hands of the Pakistani military, is Al Qaeda. The military has cooperated with the US FBI and security forces to nab 600 Al Qaeda members between October 2001 and October 2004 including key second-rung leaders in the organisation. While doing so, the Pakistan military has made a clear distinction between Al Qaeda and Taliban. While Al Qaeda leaders are arrested, Taliban leaders and former ministers move about freely in Balochistan and NWFP. They have been able to coordinate attacks on the US and other international security forces in Afghanistan. In 2004, the Pakistan military agreed to attack tribal areas as part of the war on terror and obstruct the movement of Taliban from tribal areas to Afghanistan. At the same time, some of the tribal leaders reportedly mediated between the Karzai government and Taliban to facilitate a deal between them at the cost of the Northern Alliance.

The dual approach of arresting Afghan and Arab members of Al Qaeda, while formally banning but really enabling

Pakistani militant groups to grow, has satisfied the international community. It is therefore feasible for Pakistan to continue playing with fire. This option will involve:

Using diplomatic skills to ensure gradual induction of elements of Taliban in the Afghan government to sideline the Northern Alliance and to regain strategic depth for Pakistani terrorist groups; even though this may lead to a civil war in Afghanistan by the end of the decade.

Ordering groups such as JeM and HUJI, with close connections with Al Qaeda, to lie low or shift their base to Bangladesh, Central Asia or other parts of the world.

Containing infiltration in Jammu & Kashmir but intensifying it in the Indian north-east using ULFA and other organizations.

Encouraging civil society exchanges and peace moves across India-Pakistan border while using Bangladesh as the key platform to build a network of terrorist groups in India's north-east with linkages to Nepal, Sri Lanka and India's Naxal affected heartland.

This strategy will require the continuation of the Pakistan military in power, with a façade of democracy. In order to perpetuate the military in the economy and the political system, it will be necessary to weaken popular political parties. This will create a vacuum that can only be filled by increasing the strength of religious parties, jihadi groups and secessionist organizations. Will it be possible to use brutal force against Balochi separatists as was successfully done in the 1970s and use a policy of 'divide and rule' in Sindh? Will it be then possible to claim success of the policy of 'playing with fire'?

India does not have too many alternatives in this trajectory. It can continue to build a rapport with forces of social modernism in Pakistan's government and society. It may feel dismayed by continuing terrorism and decide to snap or weaken ties; this will only be at the cost of progressive tendencies in Pakistan. India's primary focus will have to be restoring order in its own territory in the north-eastern segment and also in the central and northern states. Indian and Pakistani leaders will carry on the conflict, until they suddenly reach a moment in time, an event such as 9/11, when they will either have to ensure complete mutual destruction or make a genuine U-turn and dodge fires.

Phoenix

If the Pakistani and Indian leaders do not want to depend on some unforeseen event to determine their destiny, the only option available to them is to counter extremism with aggressive fire-fighting, which may result in a temporary increase in the inferno. The two societies can then rise in a new, progressive form from the ashes of the current degenerated structures.

For India, this option would mean cracking down on extremist groups all over, while addressing genuine grievances of the people who sympathize with them. It is necessary to bear in mind that many terrorist groups indulge in crimes such as extortion and smuggling and counterfeit currency transactions. They must be treated within the framework of law. At the same time, India will need to introduce agrarian and land reforms and provide real attention to bring about the prosperity of its periphery.

For Pakistan, this option would be tougher, but inevitable. The alternative to tough crackdown against extremist groups would be allowing transformation of the state to reach its logical end, from a partnership between bureaucracy and military in the 1950s to a partnership between jihadi forces and military latest by 2010 2020. It will not be enough to merely ban the concerned outfits enabling them to operate in different names after a lapse of some time. A complete crackdown must include:

Arrest of top leaders of all of the 100-odd organizations.

Trial of all such leaders who might have been involved in any unlawful activities either within or outside the country, including murder, extortion, smuggling and transfer of weapons.

Freezing of assets and bank accounts of certain organizations and their members, including any new organizations with which any of the members associated with previously banned organizations might be associated.

Pakistan will also have to introduce education reforms, including:

Identification of, and action against any *madrassas* that may be imparting training of violence or may be linked to any militant organizations.

Ban on schools sponsored by LeT and other organizations (or their parent bodies, such as Jama'at-ud-Dawa).

Changes in the curricula to emphasise economic and social modernism.

Protection to government and private schools from encroachment by militant organizations in terms of recruitment and indoctrination drives.

Besides internal measures the two countries will need to undertake bilateral measures with each other to prevent movement of criminals, drug traffickers and militants in each other's jurisdiction. This will primarily mean cooperation between intelligence agencies and militaries of the two countries. It is only possible with mutual trust. Thus, the option of dodging fires and rising as a pair of phoenix birds is completely predicated on the highest-level of political decision makers to establish mutual trust.

This option is also predicated on a shared vision of the region. If Pakistan wants to launch an offensive in India's northern and north-eastern states, it needs to set up terrorist training camps in Nepal and Bangladesh. Pakistanis are worried that India may set up bases in Afghanistan to intervene in Balochistan. In the process India and Pakistan will not only weaken each other but may also undermine the stability and unity of countries in the entire South Asian region from Afghanistan to Bangladesh. The 'Phoenix' option will involve a shared vision of South Asia and joint efforts to help other countries stabilize their political systems or at least not erode them deliberately to serve the selfish ends of the region's two big countries. This is not a plea for idealism. It is the law of nature that when fire spreads around the circle, it begins consuming the periphery, but it finally reaches the centre of the circle and destroys the entire territory. India and Pakistan need to commit themselves to a circle of reason in the South Asian region.