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WHY IS THE PAK LEADERSHIP OFFERING TALKS?



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Last week, while addressing a graduation ceremony at the PAF Academy, in Risalpur, the Pakistan army chief, General Bajwa stated, 'Pakistan is a peace-loving country that has rendered great sacrifices for regional and global peace. We stand committed to the ideal of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence. It is time to extend hand of peace in all directions.' The reality is that Pakistan is anything, but peace loving. He added, 'Pakistan and India must also resolve the longstanding issue of Jammu and Kashmir in a dignified and peaceful manner as per the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir and bring this human tragedy to its logical conclusion.'

The statement was reiterated by Imran Khan when he mentioned in a public rally in POK on 05 Feb, 'come resolve this Kashmir dispute with us. And for that the first thing you must do is restore article 370. And then speak to us.' He added, 'We are ready to speak to you again. I'm still asking Modi to resolve the Kashmir issue through talks, but do not mistake our hand of friendship for weakness.'

A report in Kashmirwala, a multimedia weekly magazine, stated that Hamid Mir, a reputed journalist from Pakistan, mentioned that the Pak government knew about the abrogation of article 370, three days before it happened, but did nothing. Hamid Mir added that it was also discussed in the Pak National Security Council meeting in Islamabad, but the government failed to find a solution.

Statements by Pak leaders on peace talks, would not have been made off the cuff. They come at a time when relations between the two countries is at an ebb. The High Commissions are minimally staffed, High Commissioners withdrawn, trade ties non-existent, accusations on interference in internal matters on the rise, terrorism receding in the valley and ceasefire violations at a peak. At the same time, Pakistan's Kashmir policy is in tatters. Chinese attempts to push Pakistan's claims on Kashmir in the UN has met with no response. The local Kashmiri too has understood the Pak game and is unwilling to support it. The restoration of 4G services in the valley displays the confidence of the government on the security situation in Kashmir.

Pakistan has lost its allies in the Arab world. Saudi's are demanding repayment of loans while UAE has refused to permit Pak workers from entering their country and regened on an earlier agreed CNG deal. It is also likely to demand return of loans given to Pak. There has been no response to its so-called dossier on Indian interference in their country. Simplistically put, Pakistan is alone, apart from some support flowing from Turkey and China.

Simultaneously, Pakistan's economy is in doldrums. It has been compelled to borrow from China to repay loans. It cannot finance any projects under the CPEC by itself. The pandemic has pushed millions more under the poverty line. Its remaining on the Grey List of the FATF has restricted it from borrowing more funds. It is forced to bank on WHO and Chinese largesse for vaccines to counter the pandemic. In this economic state, Pakistan lacks reserves of oil and ammunition for any major conflict. It is aware that support it received from Arab nations in earlier confrontations with India would not be forthcoming.

Their internal situation is also deteriorating. There is the growing power of hard-line clerics, threatening daily decision making. Increasing protests by Pashtun's, Kashmiri's and Sindhi's threatens the existence of the state as a single entity. The Pakistan Democratic Movement is gaining ground. Accusations on corruption by the military top brass are damaging the reputation of the army.

The Baluch insurgency is becoming stronger, and this is worrying both Pakistan and China. China has been compelled to convert Gwadar into a military camp. Increased losses to the Pak army from Baluch insurgents, are compelling it to enhance force levels to counter them. Their claims that India is behind this insurgency has been blown to smithereens by their own army. Major General Ayman Bilal, IG Frontier Corps in Baluchistan, while addressing a jirga in Baluchistan, stated, 'If the threat of FATF is averted, we will go inside Iran and take action. Iran is the biggest enemy of Pakistan which has a direct hand in the instability of Baluchistan.' He added, 'China has paid me a salary and a large sum of money and officially posted me here for their regional interests and to thwart Iran's conspiracies against CPEC.'

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and Iran are in dumps. There are regular border skirmishes with Afghanistan and the Baluchi's have sanctuaries in Iran. Last week, in response to a border incident the Pak army fired rockets into Afghanistan. Reports also state that Iranian forces conducted a cross border strike into Pakistan and freed two soldiers kidnapped by Pak supported Jaish ul-Adl, over two years ago.

The Afghan peace talks, which could have given the Taliban control over the country are now in a state of flux. The current US administration is reviewing the US-Taliban deal and have no intention of giving the country on a platter to the Taliban. NATO has announced that it would not withdraw its forces from Afghanistan in May, as per the earlier agreement. This has come as a major setback for Pakistan.

Most importantly, Pakistan leaders could never have made peace overtures without approval by China. China funds and equips their armed forces and hence has direct control over national decision-making in Pakistan.

In case the suggestion has flowed from China, then there could be another motive. If Indo-Pak talks commence, it could create an environment for China to follow suit. The intention would be to sign a tripartite agreement securing the CPEC transiting through Gilgit Baltistan, where it remains most vulnerable to Indian counter strikes. In addition, it would reduce the Chinese burden of funding the Pak army, for which it is currently responsible.

Due to Pakistan's unwillingness to display a change, India hardened its stand. Comments by Indian politicians stating that discussion can only be on POK was in response to Pak's threats on Kashmir. The stalling of China on the LAC conveyed the confidence within the Indian government and could have been a factor in Pak leader's announcement. They are aware that revoking the abrogation of article 370 will never be on the table despite any demand by them.

Coming just before the FATF review and soon after the Biden administration having taken office, it could also imply that Pak is attempting to project an image of peace and rejection of the offer by India could shift responsibility from them to India for tensions in the region.

India has, based on experience, rejected all overtures for peace by the Pak political leadership till date. It is aware that the army runs the country and if there has to be peace, then call for talks must come from the army and not a puppet polity. The Pak army has to have an enemy if it desires to continue controlling the country, maintain its budget as also force levels and prevent any criticism. Till date, the enemy was India and hence any criticism against them implied being a RAW agent. With rising internal problems, their enemy goalposts appear to have shifted.

Further, for India, words mean nothing, unless they are backed by deeds to enhance confidence. Foreign office spokespersons from both nations have placed the onus of enhancing confidence with the other. However, it was Pak which downgraded diplomatic ties immediately after the abrogation of article 370. Hence Pak would need to act first and restore them. Both nations should then seek to strictly implement the 2003 ceasefire agreement. Pak would need to ensure that its launch pads are no longer

occupied. In my opinion, expecting Pak to act against the perpetrators of Mumbai, Parliament and Pathankot prior to accepting the Pak offer is akin to the Pak army surrendering to India. This can come later.

The question which arises is would India take the bait and can Pak be trusted. The answer lies in what measures would Pak display to convince India that the offer is serious.

CERTIFICATE

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