

Pakistan's priority: Pakistani Awaam or Kashmir-obsession?

"It is high time that the country became ruthlessly realistic about its limitations and priorities. First and foremost, Pakistan's survival must precede everything else, including our attachment to the Kashmir cause. Secondly, it has to be understood that our economy is our weakest point and has to be given priority over any other consideration..."

(Ambassador Shahid M. Amin, Pakistani Foreign Service, 1999)[\[1\]](#)

Twenty years have passed since the Pakistani Ambassador Shahid M. Amin made this remark, but neither the situations nor Pakistani priorities seem to have changed. The Pakistani economy continues to crumble down and its prioritisation of destabilising the Indian subcontinent over domestic welfare remains unaltered. The most recent mixing of Pakistani priorities was visible during the August 5 announcement of the abrogation of the special status given to the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 by India. Such frenzied Pakistani reaction only reaffirms the highly unfortunate state of affairs for our western neighbour. The Paris based inter-governmental organization, Financial Action Task Force (FATF), has put the country on its Grey list yet again, for its inability to complete 21 of its 27-point action plan to check funding of various terrorist groups and their frontal organizations.[\[2\]](#) Despite the desperate state of affairs, as Islamabad's foreign policy continues to take precedence over its national policy, the country seemingly also continues to remain stuck with its Kashmir-obsession.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pakistan's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth has shrunk to 3.3 per cent and is expected to further decline to 2.4 per cent in 2020; thus it is not a hidden fact that its economy is in bad shape.[\[3\]](#) The state of affairs is such that its total debt and liabilities have been soaring high and stand at over USD 106 billion, as of June 2019.[\[4\]](#) In fact, in Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's own words at the UNGA 2019, the national debt for Pakistan has risen over four times in the past one decade.[\[5\]](#) Additionally, the inflation rate is high at 7.3 per cent which might rise to 13 per cent in 2020, and its budget deficit stands at 8.9 per cent which is the highest in 20 years.[\[6\]](#) Evidently, Pakistan is currently under a serious domestic crisis. Despite this, the Pakistani PM decides to dedicate over 30 minutes of his roughly 50-minute long United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address for Pakistan's Kashmir-obsession. Given the larger domestic context, this 'breast-beating' regarding India's J&K Reorganisation Bill is only unfortunate. It barely reflects three possibilities:

- Pakistan is using its Kashmir-obsession to camouflage its economic crisis;
- despite bearing severe losses, it refuses to prioritise its population's welfare over the unrealistic obsessions of its uniformed elite;
- the anti-Indian approach that acted like a unifying factor across reins of power in Pakistan seems to be lost since August 5, thus inflicting an existential crisis.

It is interesting to note that Bangladesh, which got its independence from Pakistan in 1971, has risen to surpass Pakistan in economic and developmental parameters in just 48 years of its existence. Its real GDP is at 7.8 per cent at present, thus exceeds that of Pakistan by more than double.[\[7\]](#) Countries like Myanmar, Maldives and Bhutan, in the region, are growing at 6.2 per cent, 6.6 per cent and 5.5 per cent respectively, each of them way ahead of Pakistan's current growth.[\[8\]](#) On the contrary, due to the ongoing economic crisis in Pakistan, the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) was forced to experience a cut in its budget by over USD 10 billion in 2018. It has impacted more than 450 projects of the PSDP

including a 50 per cent slashed budget for the country's Higher Education body, along with a removal of over 60 projects of Pakistan's National Highway Authority.[\[9\]](#)

Moreover, the entire subcontinent today is heading towards a looming water crisis. Water security will play an instrumental role in shaping future economies. With over 70 per cent of the Pakistani population is dependent on agriculture, whether the Indus and Kabul rivers assure that security, is a major concern.[\[10\]](#) Such a state of the economy coupled with an unchecked population explosion would only act as a catalyst, further destabilising the country.

Additionally, blatant hypocrisy over the issue of human rights violations appears to be a trademark that characterises Pakistan at the international stage. The selective amnesia with respect to its own act of 'gruesome genocide' in 1971[\[11\]](#), to the shrinking minority population at home (from 23 per cent in 1947 to 3 per cent currently[\[12\]](#)), as well as absolute silence on the traumas of Uighurs to ensure the inflow of Yuans for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project is appalling. The Human Development Index (HDI) indices only aggravate the preceding concerns. With an index of 0.562, it ranks the lowest among the seven countries of the Indian subcontinent. Insurgencies in Baluchistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, having emerged from ethnic divides, only add to this instability. More so, the total neglect of the condition of its own population in Baluchistan, a province which is often termed as Pakistan's 'arid desert floating on oil and minerals', is of great concern. While the province is a source of a majority of Pakistan's natural gas, a total of 59 per cent of urban Baluchistan is deprived of its benefits, as opposed to the same resource catering to 97 per cent population in Pakistan's Punjab province.[\[13\]](#) It is surprising as to how despite 83 per cent children suffering from malnutrition in Baluchistan and a subsequent declaration of a nutrition emergency by the provincial Health Minister only last year, the issue of human rights of the Baloch population always takes a back seat.[\[14\]](#) The constant persecution of its ethnic minorities, on record, including the Pashtuns, the Ahmadiyyas, the Christians, and the Hindus, speaks volumes of the social security that the country is (un)able to provide to its minority communities.

The collective threats that the Pakistani population is constantly exposed to, both in economic and social terms, raises concerning questions. Are the human rights of the Pakistani population even considered, leave alone being catered to? In the words of a celebrated Pakistani journalist himself,

"For Pakistan, human development comes a distant second. The bulk of national energies remain focused upon check-mating India."[\[15\]](#)

The 2014 school massacre in Peshawar, killing over 130 children, haunted the world to numbness. It is unfortunate that despite the country being itself hit by gruesome acts of terror, it is still home to over 130 UN-designated terrorists and 25 terror entities.[\[16\]](#) With over three decades of direct military rule, and the remaining ones by their proxy governments, it becomes pertinent for the Pakistani *awaam* to ask as to who exactly is responsible for this attitude and consequent status of the Pakistani economy and society? Having requested a twenty-second bailout from the IMF[\[17\]](#), how long will Pakistan take to organise its national interests, actually in the interest of the Pakistani *awaam*? How long would this Kashmir-obsession help Pakistan, before it actually crumbles down under its routine habit of prioritising unnecessary India-bashing over its own welfare?

A stable Pakistan is of key importance to bringing stability in the region. It is time for Pakistan, with its dwindling economy and neglected populace, to shift focus from nurturing and injecting destabilising

factors into its neighbours' territory. It is time now for the country to prioritise its responsibility towards its own people, as any State should ideally do.

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