ANTI-INDIA AGENDA

A rising J&K riles Pakistan ahead of G20 meeting

Domestic and foreign direct investment proposals are pouring into J&K. The tourism and hospitality sector has also revived. All this has left Islamabad worried.

OPINION

DIVYANSHU JINDAL

On 1 May, Pakistan expressed "grave concern" over India's "multifaceted and multi-front campaign to hold G20 summit events in Jammu and Kashmir". Pakistani President Arif Alvi deemed the Indian government's plan to host a G20 event in Srinagar as a "nefarious design" with "ulterior motives". Further, referring to a letter by a leader of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, he asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan to intensify efforts to "expose" India.

These statements have been made while the people in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) struggle to meet even the most basic necessities like food, are reeling under daily electricity cuts for most of the day, and have negligible opportunities for employment. The Pakistani argument is that Jammu and Kashmir is an internationally recognised disputed territory and that participation of G20 member states in events hosted here will lend legitimacy to an "illegal occupation". Islamabad argues that holding G20 events in the Indian Union territory is aimed at propagating a false narrative of "normalcy" in the region.

To halt these developments, Pakistan has been continuously urging its allies like China and Turkey and partners in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation like Saudi Arabia to boycott the G20 events in Jammu and Kashmir. Moreover, it has utilised its organisations and universities as lobbying platforms to seek attention from leaders of the G20 member nations to avoid participation. On social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook etc., Pakistan is operating a massive, continuous, long and ongoing campaign to tarnish India's reputation and promote any voice from India critical or sceptical of the government's decisions. This normal democratic process of seeking accountability from one's government is seen as dissent in Islamabad. Clearly, as suppressed in Pakistan, the officials in Islamabad stay in the perpetual illusion that questions are being suppressed through repression in India, as is the standard operating procedure in Pakistan.

Pakistani government officials and media have frequently attempted to argue about the Kashmiri population's socio-economic conditions. They argue that India keeps Kashmir impoverished and disempowered and its youth unemployed. In reality, Islamabad is worried about recent positive developments in Jammu and Kashmir, while Pakistan continues to battle against severe economic crises. Interestingly, between 2021 and 2022, J&K received investment proposals worth Rs 66,000 crores, much more than the bailout package that Pakistan desires from the International Monetary Fund to avoid defaulting on its debt obligations. The 2022 budget for the union territory of J&K is more than twice the amount sought by this bailout package. The Pakistani economic situation is so volatile that the IMF had to impose conditions that Pakistan will have to secure around half of the amount ($3 billion out of $6.5 billion) from other countries.

On the other hand, domestic and foreign direct investment proposals are pouring into J&K. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the J&K and Dubai governments has been signed for FDI of over Rs 500 crore. These investments focus on developing Information Technology towers and retail infrastructure like shopping malls. In the past two years, the handicraft business has blossomed in the UT, and the government is prioritising the development of 6 to 8 handicraft and handloom clusters. Taking note of this, many businesses from Punjab have already expressed interest in setting up garment units in J&K.

Further, other private industries like steel processing facilities are also finding a home here. Just last month, the foundation stone of one of J&K's biggest investments in the private health sector in J&K was laid. The Kashmir Medical College and Super-Specialty Hospital will offer around 150 seats for medical students and a hospital facility with 100 beds. The Zojila tunnel, which would serve as Asia's largest tunnel, will provide all-weather connectivity to the region and is expected to boost tourism and employment opportunities in J&K in the near future.

The discovery of Lithium reserves in India for the first time, in the Reasi district, should also be celebrated enthusiastically. This discovery stands to offer tremendous opportunities to the local population. However, it will also attract envy from Pakistan and China, who seek to occupy the region for economic exploitation.

Returning to the hosting of events, several reports and studies conducted worldwide highlight that international events contribute toward making cities and regions better by driving in money, raising reputation, and highlighting the local culture. Case studies on London, Dubai and Singapore show that international conferences and business events are vital to starting city economies by acting as economic catalysts for jobs and growth. Hosting such events may lead to long-term investments, the development of local and regional businesses, increased tax revenues, and the crafting of new niche areas of attraction. As tourism and business investments grow, the hospitality and travel sector is rejuvenated, and allied employment domains observe growth.

Numerous reports by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) underline that developing and implementing a framework for hosting global events can leverage economic, social and environmental benefits and ensure effective multi-level governance, coordination, collaboration, and institutional capacity. Such activities can establish collaborative partner relations across the world and contribute to legacy and local development.

This worries Islamabad and drives its propaganda campaign against India's decisions to bring Jammu and Kashmir closer to the world. The G20's Tourism Working Group's meeting will be held in Srinagar between 22-24 May. It will showcase Kashmir as an international tourist destination and a potential business hub. Towards the end of April, the three-day Y20 pre-summit held in Ladakh, attended by more than 100 delegates from more than 30 countries, was celebrated as a welcome development in the region. But for Islamabad, keeping this region bereft of growth and development remains in its best interests.

Divyanshu Jindal is a Research Associate at NatStrat, India.

The discovery of Lithium reserves in India for the first time, in the Reasi district, should be celebrated enthusiastically. This discovery stands to offer tremendous opportunities to the local population. However, it will also attract envy from Pakistan and China, who seek to occupy the region for economic exploitation.

PAKISTAN'S 'KASHMIR PITCH' BEFORE BILAWAL'S PARTICIPATION IN SCO MEET UNCALLED FOR

Just one day ahead of Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Goa, Pakistani President Arif Alvi asked his country's foreign ministry to launch a campaign against India's decision to hold the G20 summit in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan has made no secret about its opposition to holding any G20 proceedings in Kashmir.

Islamabad has been crying hoarse for nearly a year about India hosting the prestigious G20 events in J&K. But only a day ahead of SCO Foreign Ministers' meeting being held in Goa, in which Pakistani FM Bilawal will also participate, Pakistan President's move to raise Kashmir pitch is uncalled for and condemnable as well. Did he deliberately raise this issue just one day ahead of the SCO conclave in Goa? Is Pakistan indicating to Bilawal to bring up Kashmir during the discussions at SCO meet in Goa? Is there any strategy of Pakistan to try to build the narrative around Kashmir before the SCO FMs meeting begins? The Pakistani President's letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Islamabad asking it to launch a diplomatic campaign against India holding a G20 meeting in Jammu and Kashmir has triggered these questions. Pakistan is aware that even China has joined it in criticising India over holding G20 events in Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

With Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang also attending the SCO meeting, Pakistan's move seems to be an attempt to give some sort of a message to Beijing as well. Pakistan has been lobbying its allies in G20, like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and China to stop the meeting in Srinagar. However, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have not disappointed Pakistan. China skipped the G20 meeting only in Arunachal Pradesh.

While Bilawal is in Goa where he will address his counterparts and will have some bilateral meetings with them on Friday as well, Pakistan seems to have given a fresh push to its propaganda on the Kashmir issue. But the question is whether Bilawal will really raise this issue during his speech. Some foreign policy experts are of the view that Bilawal will not raise any bilateral issue as the SCO is a multilateral forum. No bilateral issues are raised on such platforms. But at the same time, there are instances of Pakistan misusing the multilateral forums to raise the Kashmir issue. Bilawal has raised it at the United Nations several times despite Kashmir not being on the agenda. India had to intervene and counter Pakistan for bringing up the Kashmir issue like this. What in fact annoys Pakistan is that India does not hesitate to raise the issue of terrorism and makes scathing remarks in a veiled reference to Pakistan. But the point here is that terrorism and regional security is very much on the agenda when India raises it. Other member countries of SCO do share concerns that India voices over the growing threat of terrorism in the region. The entire global community is aware that the terror attack in Poonch just hours after Pakistan announced participation of Bilawal in the SCO meeting in Goa, goes to expose only Pakistan's failure to control and curb terrorist outfits operating from the territory under its control.

So, if India raises terrorists being given safe haven in the neighbourhood, it has solid evidence to establish it. And, the international community remains convinced every time the issue of terrorism in the backdrop of such attacks is raised. In a tweet, captioned "Salaam, from Goa India," Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said: "Assalamualaikum, we have reached Goa, India on the occasion of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)." Speaking about his schedule for the day, he said, "I will first hold a meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister. Then will hold a meeting with Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister. I will attend the dinner hosted for all the foreign ministers and there are one-two interviews lined up in the day." Going by the messages posted on Twitter, Bilawal Bhutto has not yet indicated anything about Kashmir or any contentious bilateral issues with India. However, all eyes will be on the SCO Foreign Ministers' conclave on Friday to see what Bilawal brings up in his speech.

T. BRAJESH

The entire global community is aware that the terror attack in Poonch just hours after Pakistan announced participation of Bilawal in the SCO meeting in Goa, goes to expose only Pakistan's failure to control and curb terrorist outfits operating from the territory under its control.

'SMART GROWTH'

India's infrastructure growth: Policy initiatives required to enhance urban planning

MITU MATHUR

An exponentially growing urban population has led to a tremendous strain on available land and amenities in most metropolitan cities. The development of cities in the coming years will determine progress on addressing key environmental, economic, and social challenges, including climate change and access to affordable housing. Cities globally leverage public investments to build a strong foundation of a transportation hub and connected infrastructure when core city areas are identified to contain higher densities. According to the United Nations, urbanisation in the Indian context will increase to a staggering 50% by 2050. However, urban infrastructure development, such as affordable housing and water supply, has not kept pace in line with the current urbanisation trend, resulting in delayed service of deliverables and poor urban, public, and health environments.

The priority is, therefore, to develop a sustainable redevelopment model and promote it evenly for inclusive city development all over India.

As architects and urban planners, we must take a cautious approach to combat this paradigm shift to minimise human suffering and slum development. The expansion of cities that urban population growth entails cannot be contained merely by a horizontal expansion of cities; instead, it must make adequate room to accommodate it in more innovative, more inclusive, and sustainable models. In this context, the redevelopment of under-utilised central urban areas is a step in that direction.

Envisioning Redevelopment Model for Cities

Urban sprawl, a particular form of urban development, is driven by various challenges, including greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, road congestion, and a lack of affordable housing. In a populous country such as India, every region and every urban situation has to necessitate a response that adheres to the requirements that cater to the parameters that require urban interventions. In many ways, the master planning of a dense city like Delhi favours urban sprawl. Many new sectors in upcoming regions are being proposed horizontally to foster the horizontal growth of the city, whereas the under-utilised or dilapidated pockets within the city can be densified or rejuvenated to create meaningful urban spaces. Although the policy for Transit Oriented Development (TOD) has been around for various reasons, it still needs to be actively implemented by developers and promoters.

Supporting the notion of the redevelopment of ineffective planning of core city areas, prominent residential colonies of Delhi are being redeveloped to accommodate mass housing and its supporting infrastructure. These colonies have a tremendous opportunity to set a precedent as a self-sustainable dense urban community model owing to the project's sheer scale. However, there are several concerns regarding the redevelopment schemes, the most prominent being their environmental impact, growing density, and direct influence on infrastructure and resources. As architects, we must focus on mix-use developments for future developments and find ways to make them a fundamental typology in the upcoming developments of densely populated cities. In urban cities like New York and Chicago, buildings are developed right on top of the plots since they don't necessarily need a setback to create a boundary around the given area. In conjunction with public areas, there is a social responsibility towards maintaining those shared spaces. Often, building owners capitalise on footfall by creating safe and revenue-generating commercial zones and interactive ventures. However, in an Indian context, one may justify the purpose of including gated communities and boundary wall complexes as they are somewhere linked to safety. There are no gated communities in a city like London, which, surprisingly, possesses the most high-end properties.

Revitalising the Urban Grain of the city

With the use of the latest technologies, innovative building materials, and achieving a seamless integration of building with nature through design, urban redevelopment must envision retaining the essence of the place and celebrating its prominence on the city map. Alleviation of existing issues such as encroachment, traffic congestion, and scattered services around the market sometimes makes it inaccessible and a social threat. To bring about social change in the city, we must use development as a catalyst to create safer neighbourhoods and walkable communities, invigorating existing green pockets of the city and constructing world-class commercial and residential units with the latest amenities. To enable ease of access, mobility, and connectivity, integration of transit nodes of existing metro stations, existing bus stops, and a network of multi-level car parking facilities is vital.

Rethinking Urban Sprawl

Urban sprawl is an elusive concept driven by demographic, economic, geographic, social, and technological factors. These include rising incomes, preferences for living in low-density areas, natural barriers to contiguous urban development, and technological progress in car manufacturing. Most importantly, sprawl is also policy-driven. Maximum density restrictions, specific zoning regulations, tax systems misaligned with the social cost of low-density development, the underpricing of car use externalities, and the massive investment in road infrastructure contribute to this phenomenon. In addition, people often have strong preferences for specific attributes of low-density areas. Such attributes include proximity to open spaces and natural amenities, lower noise levels, better air quality, longer exposure to sunlight, and better local visibility. Land-use regulations and building height restrictions also provide a considerable barrier to the emergence of a compact city, especially when they are too stringent. Adopting the Principle of New Urbanism that aligns with the existing infrastructure and development policies is a vital principle that helps check the issue of urban sprawling to a great extent. Hence, the application of "Smart growth" or "Mixed growth" should be encouraged.

Assessing the state and implications of urban growth patterns and identifying policies to steer cities towards inclusive and green growth is essential to form unified standards and requirements for redevelopment projects at various scales. This must comply with the trends in the development of urban core areas while also considering the residents' needs. Therefore, preventing inconvenience and finding sustainable ways to allow organisational planning so that it does not cut-off neighbourhoods is vital in urban redevelopment.

Mitu Mathur is an accomplished architect and urban designer with extensive experience in designing public and institutional, master planning and housing projects.