

LAHORE

Pakistan ups the ante over Kashmir



India's decision to revoke Article 370 and bifurcate the state of Jammu &

Kashmir into two Union territories has not gone down well with Pakistan.

A meeting of the National Security Committee (NSC) on Wednesday took some important decisions in response to India's move, including downgrading diplomatic ties and suspending trade. Pakistan has also expelled the Indian envoy and decided not to send its High Commissioner-designate to India.

The sharpest reaction perhaps came from Federal Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry, who broke down during his speech on Kashmir at a joint session of Parliament and suggested that Pakistan cut off diplomatic ties with India. Ever since Prime Minister Imran Khan took oath, the government has tried its best to normalise ties with India, but "the conduct of the Indian leadership has been abhorrent", Mr. Chaudhry told *The Hindu*.

"We must take a strong stand... we have to fight it out if needed. This will not be a traditional war. From Washington to London and from Riyadh to Tehran, the world will feel the heat of this war," Mr. Chaudhry said. "It is time for the world to wake up and make the BJP realise that it can't play with fire".

The NSC decisions followed Prime Minister Khan's warning that India's decision could lead to further violence in the Kashmir Valley and even escalate tensions between the two nuclear-armed countries. Pakistan has also decided to review all bilateral agreements with India and take the Kashmir issue to the UN General Assembly and the Security Council.

According to journalist Gharidah Farooqi, the decision to expel the Indian High Commissioner is a precursor of the things to come. "Even though diplomatic ties are not cut-off with India completely, the strain in the already tense relationship is visible." Pakistan and India currently hold several bilateral agreements "not just on Kashmir but other crucial issues such as trade, water and environment – a review of which would be consequential for the people of both countries, also affecting South Asia in general."

'A weak state'

However, some analysts believe that Pakistan's reaction to India's decision was not what it should have been.

Senior journalist Wajahat S. Khan describes Pakistan's reaction in three words: "Unaware. Unprepared.

Unwilling." Mr. Khan said Pakistan's initial reaction, personified by the Prime Minister's lament of "What can I do" [about



Mehmal Sarfraz is a journalist based in Lahore.



The National Security Council has decided to downgrade diplomatic ties and suspend trade after New Delhi's decision to end Kashmir's special status

India], topped by a military/intelligence set-up that failed to see this coming, only underscores how weak a state Pakistan is, and how much under pressure it is from the powers-that-be to deliver on Afghanistan and quieten down about India.

"The embarrassing lack of policy articulation, a missing-in-action Foreign Minister, and expectedly clichéd dial-down diplomacy – like not sending the High Commissioner-designate to Delhi, which has been vacant for months anyway – only create one short-term opening for Pakistan: the UNGA in New York, this September, may be Pakistan's best shot at embarrassing India, but not vanquishing it," he added.

Legal expert Jamal Aziz said that the Indian government's move to revoke Article 370 and unilaterally alter the status quo on Kashmir is likely to backfire.

"The legal acrobatics displayed by the BJP-led government in tabling these amendments are breathtaking in their audacity and are unlikely to survive a Constitutional challenge before the Indian courts. In particular, the use of a Presidential Order to amend Article 367 and the legal fiction of the Indian Parliament acting as a substitute for the J&K Assembly are decisions which are likely to haunt the Indian leadership in the days to come. They will also have grave consequences for federalism in India."

Had India abided by the UNSC resolutions and held a plebiscite in Kashmir, then that would have definitively determined Kashmir's status, Mr. Aziz said.

"As of now, Kashmir remains a disputed territory under International law but the recent actions have converted the occupation into an annexation which again is blatant violation of International law, specifically the UN General Assembly's Resolution 2625," he added.

DHAKA

Bangladesh's battle to contain dengue surge



Mukta Khatun, a college student, was feeling feverish in the middle of

the night. A day later, a quack doctor in a distant Bangladeshi village hastily prescribed her antibiotics and her fever subsided soon afterwards. Her family thought the worst was over. After a pause of three days, Ms. Mukta, 20, felt stomach pain, followed by a bout of vomiting. She was then rushed to an ill-equipped hospital in the district of Magura, about 50 km away. Doctors there recommended her transfer to a better government hospital in Faridpur after she was diagnosed with dengue. After Ms. Mukta landed in the Faridpur hospital, she was bleeding from her nose. A senior doctor recommended immediate blood transfusion as her platelet count plummeted below 20,000, a red flag that sent her family panicking. Hours after the blood transfusion, her relatives started an eight-hour journey on August 4 towards Dhaka with the patient surviving on saline drip.

In the meantime, her elder brother Sagor Hossain, a professional driver, started scouring hospitals in Dhaka to secure a bed for her. Almost all hospitals and clinics were overrun by tens of thousands of dengue patients. "I went from place to place and there were no beds empty for any new patient. One hospital put my sister on its waiting list," said Mr. Hossain as he cupped his face in his hands to hide his tears. As the day wore on, he finally found a bed, a bit costlier, at the Holy Family Red Crescent Medical College Hospital.

Ms. Mukta's case mirrors the common battle for life in Bangladesh, where more than 32,000 dengue cases have been reported in recent times from across the country. Public health officials recorded as many as 2,400 cases of hospital admissions in a daily count. The dengue outbreak that took an alarming turn in July has so far killed about 100 people this year, according to the local media, but the number is far less in the government's record-keeping. The first dengue case in Bangladesh was recorded in 2000 when the viral disease killed 93 people out of the 5,551 reported cases. This year's numbers dwarfed all previous records.

What went wrong?

Health specialists blamed it on the changing weather pattern, rains followed by extreme heat, stagnant water, cities' appalling failure in vector and waste management and, finally, human behaviour.

"Climate change and intermittent rains are partly responsible for the massive spread of the disease this year.



Arun Devnath is a journalist based in Dhaka.



The dengue outbreak in Bangladesh that took an alarming turn in July has so far killed about 100 people this year, report local media

Stagnant water in and around construction sites in Dhaka is another potential breeding source of *Aedes* mosquitoes," said M.M.

Akhtaruzzaman, manager of the malaria and dengue programme at the Directorate General of Health Services.

The global incidence of dengue has grown dramatically in recent decades. About half of the world's population is now at risk, according to the World Health Organization. One estimate indicates 390 million dengue infections every year, of which 96 million manifest clinically.

The Philippines declared a "national dengue epidemic" after at least 622 people lost their lives this year. At least 1,46,000 cases were recorded in the country from January to July 20, a 98% increase from a year ago. "That means Bangladesh is not the only country suffering from the disease. It's a global health issue," said Mr. Akhtaruzzaman.

After the disease broke out on a scale never seen before, two Mayors of Dhaka faced criticism for their failure to contain the mosquito menace and improve vector management in a city of 17 million people. To speed up efforts to combat dengue, the government forked out 150 million taka (\$1.7 million) for the two city corporations. Earlier, the National Board of Revenue removed all tariffs on the imports of dengue test kits and reagents to boost supply. The Dhaka Medical College Hospital, one of the best-equipped state-run facilities, is setting up intensive care units to cope with the rush of patients.

Over at the Holy Family hospital, Ms. Mukta showed signs of recovery, with her blood platelet count shooting past 1,25,000, taking stress off her family. She regained her strength bit by bit. She was released from the hospital on August 8 as her condition remained stable. But countless others may not be just as lucky.

BEIDAIHE

When China's leaders and 'elders' meet

 Tucked away 300 km east of Beijing, Beidaihe is a small coastal enclave on the Bohai Sea. Tourists flock to the town, attracted by its sandy beaches, lush greenery and winding trails.

Beidaihe's pleasant scenery, balmy atmosphere and its proximity to Beijing caught the eye of the first generation of leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC). PRC founder Mao Zedong decided to hold annual retreats at this location, where party seniors could quietly brainstorm the country's most intricate problems in a relaxed atmosphere.

Mao took some momentous decisions during the Beidaihe meetings, including the launch of the Great Leap Forward campaign, and the 1958 shelling of the Quemoy island – the closest Kuomintang outpost to the mainland.

Incidentally, a massive guesthouse, like dozens of similar constructions across China, sprang up in Beidaihe. Its purpose was to house visiting Soviet experts who were partnering China in its "socialist construction" during the 1950s.

Over the years, the end-July or early August Beidaihe conclaves became known for a unique feature, when the leaders of the day were joined by their predecessors, also called "elders". During the informal interaction, the "elders" were free to criticise or offer non-binding advice to the leaders. The opinion of the "elders" has been taken seriously.

Though the previous generation may have left office, many of them continue to exercise influence in the rank and file of the Communist Party of China (CPC), mainly on the basis of ideology, region or policy. "Beidaihe is where and when senior leaders can get together in informal meetings to exchange their views on major policies and therefore, it plays a very significant role in policymaking in Chinese politics," says Alfred Wu, associate professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, as quoted by the *South China Morning Post*.

The Beidaihe meetings are not announced but there are always giveaway signs that the summer retreat has commenced. An early August report by Xinhua news agency revealed that two senior party functionaries were already in Beidaihe to meet 58 top experts – the brain trust of the country. The two were Chen Xi, who heads the Organisation Department of the CPC and Sun Chunlan, a member of the 25-member Politburo. Ms. Sun is also a Vice-

Premier of China, a position that showcases her remarkable rise from an ordinary worker in a clock factory soon after she



During the annual Beidaihe conclaves, China's past leaders, known as the 'elders', are free to criticise or offer non-binding advice to the leaders of the day

passed out from the Anshan Industrial Technology Academy in the northeastern Liaoning province. Chinese media reports say the meeting of the two senior officials with the intellectuals marked the start of this year's Beidaihe conclave.

Agenda of the meet

The precise agenda of the Beidaihe meeting is hard to discern, but sections of the Chinese media tracking the recent movements of the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, China's top leadership, have drawn some early conclusions.

According to Chinese publication Duo Wei, popular among expats, the Beidaihe meeting will hope to give clear policy directions to a host of problems confronting China, from the trade war with the U.S. to the unrest in Hong Kong and the situation in Taiwan.

The situation in Xinjiang, where China's "re-education camps" have attracted international criticism for rights violations, is also expected to feature at Beidaihe.

China Central Television (CCTV) reported in July that Wang Yang, the fourth-ranking Politburo Standing Committee member, had attended a three-day conference in the Hetian district of Xinjiang. CCTV introduced Mr. Wang as the head of the Central Committee's Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group.

Mr. Wang, the troubleshooter, also paid a visit to Qinghai, a high altitude province on the Tibetan plateau, apparently to take stock of the politically sensitive assault on poverty.


Ahead of the Beidaihe meeting, Han Zheng, another Politburo Standing Committee member, has been visiting Shenzhen, China's hi-tech city that is next door to Hong Kong. From Shenzhen, Mr. Han has been authorised to communicate with Hong Kong's top leaders.



Atul Aneja is *The Hindu's* Beijing correspondent.

COLOMBO

Was the terror plot thicker than the attack?

 In the last week of June, Sri Lankan police recovered a huge stash of arms and explosives in the eastern town of Kattankudy from where Zahran Hashim, the alleged mastermind of the Easter bombings, hailed. It included some 300 gelignite sticks, 1,000 detonators, and nearly 500 T56 live ammunition. The recovery reportedly shocked investigators, who had made considerable progress in their probe of the April 21 attack that claimed over 250 lives.

The search operation was based on information from Mohamed Milhan, one of the five suspects deported from Saudi Arabia earlier in June. Currently in custody, Milhan was a likely heir to Zahran Hashim. "It was an eye-opener, really," a top official, familiar with the probe, told *The Hindu*.

"The material would have been enough for another 25 suicide attacks," the official said, requesting anonymity, given the sensitivity of the investigations. "A crucial source" is how the official described Milhan, who reportedly tried to join the IS but was unsuccessful. A resident of Kattankudy, he left Sri Lanka on April 17, days before the attacks.

The seizure of weapons and explosives based on his clue, seen along with earlier confiscations, has given "a different direction" to the investigations, according to the senior official.

Days after the Easter blasts that suicide bombers carried out at churches and hotels in capital Colombo and in the eastern district of Batticaloa, troops raided a safe house on the island's east coast. In addition to explosives, they seized dozens of white dresses, usually worn by Buddhist women for temple visits or prayers, sparking concern over possible future attacks targeting Buddhists.

While all main suspects, including family members of the suicide bombers, are under custody and heightened surveillance continues across the country, investigators are wary of dismissing the possibility of a "lone wolf attack". "We have to be very vigilant," the official said.

Meanwhile, criminal investigations into the Easter attacks are "nearly complete", according to officials, who are awaiting forensic reports from government analysts and foreign experts, who have been supporting the investigation. By end of the month, they hope to submit a report to the Attorney General's Department, so that prosecutions can be initiated.

With all key suspects are under custody, and details of suicide bombers compiled, investigators are piecing together



Acting upon information provided by one of the suspects, police seized explosives and ammunition from an eastern town in June

other information to establish how the individuals linked up and maintained their network.

Deadliest incident

The Easter day bombings were the deadliest incident in Sri Lanka in its relatively peaceful post-war decade. The country's economy, particularly the tourism sector, is struggling to recover from the shock and impact after three months.

Over 1,00,000 tourists arrived in July, but it is still a 46.9% drop compared to July last year, according to data provided by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. However, hotels and malls are gradually beginning to draw more people, and Sri Lankans and tourists are able to travel across the country.

In addition to the CID's probe, a presidential committee is investigating the Easter blasts, as is a parliamentary panel that has been collecting testimonies from top security officials, bureaucrats and political leaders.

Earlier this week, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the top most official to appear before the parliamentary committee, said he was yet to get a "satisfactory response" on why he was not briefed about the prior intelligence available with the authorities.

Top security officers knew of a possible terror threat, but both President Maithripala Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe have maintained they did not know.

Multiple accounts from investigators suggest that the IS, which belatedly claimed the attacks, was not directly involved. Local Islamist radicals carried out the terror operation, officials have said.

"In fact, even the suspects in custody are telling us that Zahran had only a small group to start with. He was able to recruit more youth only after the anti-Muslim riots in Digana in 2018," the senior official said.



Meera Srinivasan is *The Hindu's* Colombo correspondent.