**Kashmir at the OIC**

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The recently held OIC Council of Foreign Ministers’ conference in Islamabad is a great diplomatic achievement for Pakistan against the backdrop of the complex internal political crises currently looming large in Pakistan.

For the second time in just three months, Pakistan had the honour of hosting the OIC Foreign Ministers’ Conference, participated by 32 foreign ministers and more than 700 delegates. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi did not only attend the conference but also made a powerful statement about the Kashmir issue, which irked New Delhi once again.

Interestingly, the Kashmir conflict and the deteriorating situation in Indian Occupied Kashmir cropped up quite significantly in the joint declaration issued after the conference and in other proceedings such as the OIC Contact Group meeting, which was attended by foreign ministers of five countries – Azerbaijan, Niger, Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Besides this, the OIC secretary general, representative of the OIC’s Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC), the president of Azad Kashmir and two representatives of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference also attended the meeting. The insiders, while talking to me, revealed that all participants unanimously endorsed the content, stance and phraseology employed in the five paragraphs talking about the Kashmir issue at length in the declaration.

In fact, since the abrogation of Article 370 and the downgrading of the status of Indian-held Kashmir to that of a union territory, OIC countries, particularly the Gulf states, largely avoided taking sides. Last year, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi criticised a group of Muslim countries for delaying holding a special OIC Foreign Ministers session on Kashmir. Hence, no miracle was being expected from the two-day OIC conference. Even then, the OIC Foreign Ministers’ Conference issued a comprehensive statement on the Kashmir dispute which reflects the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. Additionally, for the first time in history, the Kashmir issue was comprehensively discussed in the joint declaration.

The joint declaration expressed support for Kashmiris’ right to self-determination as per the UN Security Council resolutions and the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. Human rights violations in Occupied Kashmir were unequivocally condemned. The OIC also rejected the unilateral Indian measures taken on August 5, 2019, aimed at changing the demographic structure of the occupied territories and impeding Kashmiris’ inalienable right to self-determination. Above all, the OIC called on India to reverse all illegal and unilateral measures taken on or after August 5, 2019. In a statement, the OIC called on India to allow an OIC special representative to visit Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and the OIC fact-finding mission to conduct an impartial review of the human rights situation there.

Analysis of the joint declaration shows that the government of Pakistan, in collaboration with the OIC Secretariat in Jeddah, succeeded in issuing a comprehensive declaration after considerable diplomatic efforts. The tone and language used in this declaration need to be maintained at future OIC conferences too. Significant diplomatic pressure could be put on India, especially if the OIC summit takes a similarly unequivocal stand on the issue in its upcoming meeting to be held in the Gambia at the end of 2022.

In this context, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has indicated that a strategy shall be formulated in collaboration with the OIC Secretariat in order to keep OIC countries informed about the developments on the Kashmir issue. The OIC human rights commission, commonly known as the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC), is also vigorously active on the matter. Its members visited Muzaffarabad in December last year to interact with victims of the atrocities committed along the Line of Control (LoC) and the Kashmiris displaced from Srinagar and other areas. In addition, the OIC has a Kashmir Contact Group, which has been keeping an eye on the Kashmir situation, since it started in 1993. The successive OIC secretary-general has also been intensely watching the Kashmir situation and urging India to change its policy towards Occupied Kashmir.

The Indian government has raised three objections on the above-mentioned developments. The Indian foreign ministry expressed anger over the president of Azad Kashmir and Hurriyat Conference leaders being invited to attend the conference. The second objection was on the Chinese foreign minister’s remarks about the Kashmir issue. The third objection was to the points raised in the declaration regarding Occupied Kashmir.

In his speech, the Chinese foreign minister said that he shared the sentiments and feelings expressed about Kashmir on the forum. In recent years, a few Gulf states tried to pave the way for India’s representation in the OIC. In 2019, the late Sushma Swaraj was invited to the Foreign Ministers’ Conference held in the UAE. By inviting the Chinese foreign minister to the OIC conference, Pakistan has perhaps responded to the growing Indian influence in Muslim-only institutions.

Pakistan has already played a vital role in establishing ties between China and the Muslim world, and now China’s presence in a major forum like the OIC is certainly a major diplomatic achievement. This will probably encourage China to make a concerted effort to address the concerns and reservations of Muslims in China so that its relations with the Muslim world could be further strengthened.

Although the OIC has not been able to become an effective international organisation so far, it is still a useful platform as it is the only joint forum of Muslim-majority countries where they consistently discuss their collective issues and express their views. Over the last few years, the organisation has significantly expanded its reach and is now working on several regional and global issues, including human rights, in collaboration with other international organisations.

Pakistan must hold its ground to strive constantly with other leading Muslim-majority countries for the betterment of this organisation so that it becomes a more active and influential global forum for Muslims around the world.

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