

## Arrest the slide

The spectacle of two nuclear-armed nations bickering like schoolchildren is nothing if not comic, and the Twitter fight between US President Donald Trump and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un had given the world plenty to snigger about. It is more difficult to laugh when the joke hits closer home. India and Pakistan have never offered a model of good neighbourly relations. Yet their conduct over the last couple of weeks would have been entertaining if it did not give rise to a new sense of despair. Now they are ringing each other's doorbells in Islamabad and New Delhi in pre-dawn attacks on the nerves of diplomats and shooting smartphone videos of diplomats' kids.

Harassment of Indian and Pakistani diplomats posted in each other's countries had become a thing of the past. The last time such complaints came to the fore was in 2006. Usually, the reasons on the surface are petty, such as denial of membership to a club. But they tend to look bigger when relations between the two sides are not in the pink of health. Irrespective of the club membership denied to the Indian High Commissioner in Islamabad, and the 3 am ring of the doorbell at the Indian Deputy High Commissioner's, India should ask itself if retaliation in kind behoves a country with global aspirations.

That this style of doing diplomacy, given up a decade ago, has made a comeback underlines what is most worrying about this saga: Diplomatic relations between the two countries have slid to where they were at the start of this century. The High Commissioner of Pakistan to India has returned for "consultations" to Islamabad, and going by reports in the Pakistani press, is unlikely to return until a resolution. Pakistan will not attend a WTO meeting in New Delhi. All this has overshadowed even the modest gains on the prisoners' issue earlier this month. The present moment recalls a time when India downgraded its mission in Islamabad, and Pakistan followed suit, in the wake of the 2001 Parliament attack. Expulsions followed and eventually, the two sides had only a shell of a diplomatic presence on the other side until 2004, when relations began to improve following the Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting in Islamabad.

That process broke down in 2008, and the [Narendra Modi](#) government has entirely given up attempts to revive it, citing the Pathankot and Uri attacks. It is unfortunate, even alarming, that in both countries, those in charge of the foreign policy and security establishments are sanguine that the deteriorating situation — most evident in the breakdown of the ceasefire at the LoC, where five more civilians were killed in Balakote sector of Poonch on Sunday in firing from Pakistan — does not demand a renewed push, of the kind Musharraf and Vajpayee gave it, to restart engagement. Indeed, on the Indian side, Pakistan's "recall" of its High Commissioner is possibly being seen as a pressure tactic on India for talks which should be resisted. Two mavericks have decided that it's time to change history in East Asia. Time to ask why not in South Asia.

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