

EXPRESS VIEW ON IRAN-PAKISTAN CONFLICT: STEP BACK FROM BRINK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The complex relationship between Iran and Pakistan is teetering on the edge. On Tuesday, Iran carried out strikes in Pakistan's Balochistan province — its aircraft reportedly crossed into Pakistani air space — ostensibly to target Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni group that has carried out attacks within Iran. Pakistan has claimed that two minors died in the attack. Islamabad's first reaction was diplomatic: It recalled its ambassador from Tehran, registered a protest with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and suspended bilateral visits. On Thursday, Pakistan launched its own strikes in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, claiming to target "Pakistan-origin terrorists" who have bases in Iran. Neither Iran nor Pakistan can afford an escalation of this conflict. The former is already involved in multiple proxy wars in West Asia, not least the Israel-Hamas conflict. Pakistan has volatile and militarised borders with India and Afghanistan, and is mired in deep economic crisis.

Pakistan and Iran are Islamic republics yet in both countries Muslim minorities at the so-called periphery have not found adequate representation or equal rights. The Balochistan region (the province in Pakistan that is the country's largest) has a large area and a sparse population. Among the Baloch people, while there is a broad cultural and linguistic affinity, there are also significant internal differences — of sect, class and tribe. The community has often been treated with suspicion and outright discrimination by both states. This has been taken advantage of by violent separatist groups as well as external actors. The former has used the frontier regions of each country against the other. Both Tehran and Islamabad have often accused each other of providing tacit support to — or at the very least, of not doing enough to counter — these violent groups. Jaish al-Adl is one of several Sunni-Salafist outfits fighting for an independent Sistan-Baluchestan said to operate from Pakistan. The group has claimed responsibility for bombings and attacks on Iran's border police in the past. Last year, there were several attacks on both sides of the border in which security forces were killed.

The immediate trigger for Iran's audacious attack remains unclear. Given the regional context — it carried out similar strikes in Syria and Iraq earlier this week — the action against Pakistan could be part of a larger muscle-flexing in light of the Israel-Hamas war spreading to other parts of West Asia. There has also been a reported increase in Jaish al-Adl activity recently. Whatever the provocations, it is now imperative for both sides to act with maturity. Pakistan's Foreign Office has said that the sole objective of the attack was protecting the country's security while the Army has said that "dialogue and cooperation" can solve bilateral issues. Beyond the current moment, governments and armies need to cease their support for terrorism. In the long run, addressing the concerns of disaffected minorities in the region will help tackle the challenge posed by violent separatist movements.

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