

The strategy of conflict

A little over two months into 2018, the violence on the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) stretch of the India-Pakistan border has reached a new high: more than 633 ceasefire violations (CFVs) by Pakistan have been reported by New Delhi which have claimed the lives of 12 civilians and 10 soldiers. Many more have been injured and several civilian habitats along the border destroyed. Till the first week of March, Pakistan reported 415 CFVs by India which have claimed 20 civilian lives (there is no data on Pakistani military casualties).

The calibre of weapons used on the border have also graduated from short-range personal weapons to 105 mm mortars, 130 and 155 mm artillery guns and anti-tank guided missiles. With the rising violence, casualties and upcoming elections in both countries, we may have a perfect recipe for escalation on our hands.

The question we must ask ourselves at this point, then, is this: is this sheer mindless violence, or is there a strategy behind this violence? And if there indeed is a strategy, is it a carefully calibrated one and what are its likely outcomes?

Ever since the ceasefire agreement (CFA) of 2003, New Delhi seems to have followed three broad strategies to deal with the violence on the J&K border. These three approaches — 'talks over bullets', 'talks and bullets', and 'disproportionate bombardment' — have identifiable costs and benefits associated with them.

The years immediately after the 2003 CFA witnessed a great deal of calm on the borders with CFVs dropping to a minimum even though infiltration into J&K and sporadic, minor terror attacks against India continued to take place. There were no major terror attacks, and Kashmir was calm. Bilateral talks drastically reduced violence during that phase. This lasted roughly till 2008.

Another phase when this strategy was evident was following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lahore. Thanks to the rapprochement achieved by his visit, the period from December 2015 to February 2016 hardly witnessed any CFVs, despite the Pathankot Air Force base attack in early January 2016.

The benefits of this strategy, adopted mostly by the previous United Progressive Alliance government and briefly by the incumbent National Democratic Alliance government, are evident. Engagement with Pakistan and quiet on the border are strongly correlated. The downside, however, is that New Delhi feels that it tried the strategy of peace and talks several times in the past and failed to get a positive response from Pakistan. This has led to a great deal of bitterness in India.

Failure of this strategy has been due to the periodic terror attacks carried out against India, infiltration into J&K and the rise of militancy in Kashmir, in all of which India sees significant contribution of the Pakistani establishment. While there are benefits of talks, they are neither consistent nor without political costs. Put differently, the costs of 'talks over bullets' strategy, in New Delhi's calculation, seem to outweigh the benefits.

The second strategy has been to engage in talks while proportionately responding to Pakistani provocations. The period from 2010 to 2012 seems to fall in this category. Consider this: the two sides engaged each other in talks during this time and CFVs reduced significantly — India reported 70 violations in 2010, 62 in 2011 and 114 in 2012. In 2010, the two Foreign Secretaries met in New Delhi, followed by the two Foreign Ministers meeting in Islamabad. In 2011, the two Foreign Secretaries met in Thimphu, and in 2012 the Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers

issued a joint statement in Islamabad.

While the talks went on, the firing on the J&K borders did not come to a complete halt. Both talks and firing persisted, though at moderate levels. The benefits of this game of proportionate response — ‘talks for talks and bullets for bullets’ — which went on without much fuss are clear: very little risk of escalation, fewer casualties and limited destruction.

However, this strategy comes with major political costs. Hardliners and the opposition in India criticised the Manmohan Singh government of being weak, in particular when the beheadings of Indian soldiers took place in 2013, and reports indicated an increasing spate of what India refers to as BAT (border action team) operations by the Pakistan army. The political costs of not upping the ante against Pakistan seemed to outweigh its military benefits.

The third Indian strategy is disproportionate bombardment of the Pakistani side using high calibre weapons while not showing any desire for talks, negotiations or concessions, and shunning Pakistani suggestions thereof. India’s reported rejection, in January, of a Pakistani proposal for a meeting between the two Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs), saying it first wanted to see a drop in infiltration levels is a direct outcome of this strategy. The domestic component of this strategy also involves a great deal of politicisation of the Indian Army’s feats on or across the Line of Control, such as the surgical strikes against Pakistan in September 2016.

CFVs since April 2016 and the current state of India-Pakistan relations are largely informed by this strategy. Despite the rising terrorist attacks inside J&K and the increasing CFVs, there has been hardly any dialogue (barring the meeting between the two National Security Advisors in Bangkok, which achieved precious little). India, according to Pakistan, violated the ceasefire 389 times from April to December 2016, and in 2017 over 2,000 times, with the trend continuing this year. India reported 449 violations by Pakistan in 2016, and 860 in 2017.

The benefits of this disproportionate bombardment strategy are too obvious to miss. Its domestic political utility is enormous given the surprisingly few questions being asked of the government about the rising civilian and military casualties. The ‘we kill more than they do’ argument, combined with the ‘surgical strikes’ narrative, creates a powerful political discourse laden with potential electoral benefits for the ruling dispensation in New Delhi.

There are inherent costs associated with this strategy. First, the disproportionate bombardment strategy could potentially escalate to worrying levels — a rising toll could reverse popular support for the current muscular approach. Second, more killing and destruction would also steadily shrink the space available for negotiated outcomes with Pakistan. Finally, the current media frenzy surrounding the border violence and the associated nationalist sentiments could become a worry for the government if and when it wishes to negotiate with Pakistan.

Pakistan seems to adopt a three-fold strategy on the J&K border informed by its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis India: keep the violence on the border carefully calibrated without upping the ante; seek meaningful talks on Kashmir to turn down the rhetoric on Kashmir and infiltration into J&K; propose tactical measures to reduce violence on the borders such as DGMO talks and reduction in the calibre of weapons, without giving up its claims and interests in Kashmir. In other words, Pakistan is looking for either conflict management vis-à-vis the J&K border or a major dialogue process to resolve the Kashmir issue.

There is then a clear mismatch between the expectations and strategies of New Delhi and Islamabad/Rawalpindi. Whereas India is looking for an end to cross-border infiltration and Pakistani involvement in Kashmir in return for an end to shelling on the border, Pakistan is desirous of a resolution of or meaningful talks on Kashmir in return for calm borders and cracking

down on anti-India terror groups in Pakistan. The two sides must therefore try and find a via media between these two differing sets of expectations if they wish to bring down the violence on the J&K border that is increasingly spiralling out of control.

Happymon Jacob teaches Indian Foreign Policy at JNU and curates an online archive on the India-Pakistan conflict

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