

THE MIXED SIGNALS FROM PAKISTAN

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Now that the first round of military tit-for-tats is over, it is important that New Delhi settles down to parsing the mixed signals coming out of Pakistan. While keeping all options open, it is important for the government to make a definitive assessment regarding Pakistan's intentions before taking the next step in both the military and diplomatic spheres. This is a difficult job, among other things because the real decision-makers in Pakistan are not the Prime Minister and his cabinet but the top generals ensconced in General Headquarters in Rawalpindi.

Nonetheless, one can get a fair idea of the thinking by Pakistani decision-makers by analysing the statements and actions of politicians because they are often orchestrated by the military high command. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's pronouncements are, therefore, worth following closely. His most recent statement in the Pakistan Parliament betrays the internal conflict in both his and his generals' assessment of the current India-Pakistan standoff and its impact on the standing of the Pakistani military in the eyes of the country's population.

Mr. Khan has, on the one hand, emphasised his desire for de-escalation without accepting blame for the initial action, the Pulwama terrorist attack, that triggered the present crisis. While ostensibly addressing the Indian government, he has attempted to present a reasonable face to the international community by expressing his yearning for peace in the subcontinent. He has especially emphasised the fact that both countries are nuclear powers and, therefore, any further escalation could lead to disastrous results.

His announcement on Thursday that Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman would be released "unconditionally" falls in this category of de-escalatory signals. His statement also made it clear that he wanted to link the release to the reopening of negotiations with India in order to find a way out of the current crisis.

While India welcomed this move, it refused to give Pakistan credit for what Islamabad considers a humanitarian gesture. India has characterised it as an act undertaken in consonance with the Geneva Convention that Pakistan, as a signatory, is compelled to follow. Therefore, Islamabad does not deserve extra credit for merely fulfilling its international obligations.

In the same speech, Mr. Khan warned the Indian leadership, "Do not take this confrontation further", saying otherwise Pakistan will be "forced to retaliate". He also made no apologies for the terrorist acts committed by jihadi groups spawned by Pakistan's military intelligence. Instead, he once again asked New Delhi for proof that the Pulwama attack could be traced to Pakistan despite the Bahawalpur-based Jaish-e-Mohammad's acknowledgement, immediately after the suicide bombing, that it was responsible for the incident.

There are various reasons one can decipher for Pakistan's double-speak. Mr. Khan's de-escalatory rhetoric is in part the result of external pressure, especially from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Foreign Minister made a dash to Islamabad to advise the Pakistan government not to let the crisis get out of hand. It was also clear from U.S. President Donald Trump's statement in Hanoi, in which he suggested that good news was about to emanate from South Asia, that Washington had put pressure on Islamabad and possibly on New Delhi not to engage in further military action.

It is true that the fear of escalation to the nuclear level haunts both Indian and Pakistani decision-makers and acts as a formidable restraint preventing both from intensifying the conflict.

An action-reaction dynamic, such as the one that started with the Pulwama attack, can conceivably graduate to the nuclear level if Pakistan, which does not accept the “no first use” doctrine, decides to take recourse to tactical nuclear weapons, which it has stockpiled, if it finds itself unable to withstand India’s superior conventional power.

On the other hand, the Indian nuclear doctrine does not make a distinction between tactical and strategic nuclear strikes and implies that India will respond through massive retaliation even if a tactical weapon use does only a limited amount of damage. It is, therefore, difficult to predict in this context where the escalatory process, if left unchecked, would end.

However, all these very real concerns about uncontrolled escalation have to be measured against the Pakistani military brass’s obsession with its honour and credibility among its people. Both have been severely damaged by its inability to anticipate and thwart the Indian aerial attack on Balakot deep inside Pakistani territory. The military is the real power behind the throne in Pakistan. Mr. Khan’s ascent to office was deftly managed by the military high command, which, unlike in India, is also in control of the country’s nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

These facts make any future escalatory scenario look very scary. For, if pushed to the wall and in danger of losing control of the state, the Pakistani military can employ a highly reckless strategy that would unleash an unprecedented catastrophe in the Indian subcontinent. It is no wonder that Mr. Khan has to speak with both sides of his mouth in a desperate attempt to preserve the military’s honour while attempting to get off the escalatory ladder that can lead to unpredictable consequences.

Mohammed Ayoub is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University and Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Center for Global Policy, Washington DC

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