

A CASE FOR AGGRESSIVE DIPLOMACY: ON INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

Pakistan and India are strange nations. Just as the conflict after India's bombing of the Balakot terror camp was winding down, Pakistan alleged on March 5 that it had [thwarted the entry of an Indian submarine](#) into its waters. India responded that Pakistan [was indulging in false propaganda](#). On the same evening, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry issued a statement that its High Commissioner to India, Sohail Mahmood, [would be returning to Delhi](#) and talks with India on the Kartarpur Corridor would go ahead. It was a signal that tensions were officially being defused. India confirmed the talks on Kartarpur and [also sent back Indian High Commissioner Ajay Bisaria to Islamabad](#).

The morning and evening's events of March 5 could cause genuine confusion among the public. But it appears as though Pakistan, through its morning assertion, was playing to its domestic audience, while its evening statement was a signal to the international community that it had no further desire to climb the escalation ladder with India.

It was U.S. President Donald Trump who provided the first clear indication of the involvement of major powers in defusing tensions between India and Pakistan. Apart from the Americans, the Chinese and Saudis also seem smack in the middle of the India-Pakistan equation. If the Indian intention post-Pulwama was to isolate Pakistan, that doesn't seem to have happened.

For the two governments, given that the score was level — one had shot down a F-16 and the other had shot down an MiG-21 — they could now respond positively to global concerns. As for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 'Operation Balakot' had given him ammunition to use in his election rallies.

The Modi government's decision to go ahead with the Kartarpur talks days after tensions were at the peak, and after withdrawing the Most Favoured Nation status to Pakistan, is bizarre, but it serves two purposes. One, it is an effort to win votes in the Punjab. Two, it shows India as being reasonable before the international community.

There is little doubt that India got away with its pre-emptive strike in Balakot because Pakistan's denials that it has nothing to do with fostering groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) carry no credibility, including among thinking members of its own civil society. Further, the JeM even claimed responsibility for the [Pulwama terror strike](#). There's also little doubt that India and Pakistan narrowly escaped a full-fledged conflict, the extent of which can never really be predicted amid social media propaganda, fake videos, domestic pressures and ugly jingoism on both sides.

The India-Pakistan nuclear 'deterrent' was first put to test by General Pervez Musharraf, who planned the Kargil incursion months after Pakistan went publicly nuclear in response to the Indian nuclear tests of May 11 and 13, 1998.

As India began clearing the Kargil heights of the Pakistani Northern Light Infantry masquerading as 'mujahideen', there was enormous pressure on Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to use the Indian Air Force across the Line of Control after the loss of two MiG aircraft. But Vajpayee held firm against both public and IAF pressure. During the Kargil conflict, Pakistan's then Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmed and Minister Raja Zafar-ul-Haq made it clear that its

nuclear weapons were not for show, but for use. Pakistan's conduct during Kargil exposed the state as irresponsible and led to numerous international calls for respecting the LoC. Had India retaliated across the LoC then, or hit back against Pakistani retaliation during this year's confrontation, the country's "miltabishment", to borrow Pakistani journalist Najam Sethi's expression, in Rawalpindi may well have been pondering the unthinkable nuclear option.

Pakistan went to great lengths to obtain its nuclear capability to insulate itself against India and no "miltabishment" can survive there if it's unable to even the score with India. The nuclear option is built into the trajectory of its survival as a state.

India can ignore such default Pakistani options at its own — and the region's — peril. Looking strong in an election year might be good for a political party's prospects, but will do nothing to enhance India's credentials as a responsible state that thinks long term.

During the Kargil war in 1999, after the Parliament attack in 2001, and post the Mumbai attack in 2008, two Prime Ministers of India had the option of retaliation, but they did not exercise it. Instead, India's patience projected the responsible nature of the state, which was in stark opposition to Pakistan's tattered credibility.

It is a commentary on the sorry state of India's covert capabilities that key figures in the terror network in Pakistan operate unhindered. A key planner of the 1999 IC-814 hijacking and founder of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Fazlur Rehman Khaleel, was recently received at a Pakistani air base in Waziristan. That's the ground reality. Whatever Pakistan is doing to rein in the JeM and LeT is being dictated by the threat of sanctions from the Financial Action Task Force, not by Indian pressure. These actions will vanish if the threat of sanctions dissipates.

A conventional response to terrorist groups can demonstrate intent, but does very little to whittle down their abilities. Covert capabilities coupled with deft and persistent diplomacy is the only way forward in such difficult circumstances.

The Modi government's inability to reach out to Kashmiris and its actions against the Hurriyat leadership at a time when the separatists have lost control of the public mood underline an uncaring attitude. This has also created a fertile ground for Kashmiri youth to join terrorist ranks.

Indian state responses cannot be reactive to the agenda of terrorist groups, howsoever brutal their actions are. A calm, mature, informed and long-term strategy with aggressive diplomacy at its core, one that leverages India's economic strength, remains the country's best bet to deal with the terrorist threat from Pakistani soil.

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India can take up its fight against terrorism at the United Nations Security Council in various ways

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