

Report

India Pakistan Conflict: what is next for the historic foes?

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An Indian soldier keeps guard from a bunker near the border with Pakistan in Abdullian [Reuters]

Abstract

This report explores the dynamics behind the recent confrontation between India and Pakistan. The analysis has three aims. Firstly, it looks at India's aggressive approach towards Pakistan. The context of this is the recent terrorist attack in the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir State. Secondly, it examines Pakistan's policy of using non-state actors as one means of foreign policy pressure on India. Related to this is whether Islamabad is likely to crackdown on militant groups after India's own growing pressure on Pakistan. Lastly, and in light of recent military and diplomatic confrontation, the report tries to explore the prospects of reconciliation between the two historical foes.

Introduction

The messy transfer of power in the subcontinent in 1947 from British colonial rule to India and Pakistan left deep scars of mutual suspicion and insecurity in both countries. In Pakistan, primarily, this insecurity has deepened over the last six decades with the policymakers in Islamabad always citing India as a sole external threat to the country's security and survival.⁽¹⁾ A wide range of bilateral disputes, including the Kashmir dispute, have prolonged this volatile conflict. Pakistan and India have since 1947 gone to war three times with the 1971 Indian intervention in the East Pakistan resulting in Pakistan's dismemberment.

In order to contain the perceived threat from India, Pakistan on its part, has used all conventional and non-conventional means of warfare available at its disposal. To achieve this goal, Pakistan has employed and supported a range of Islamist militant proxies in Kashmir in its bid to force India to make some compromises on the Kashmir issue.⁽²⁾ Despite Pakistan's various efforts to capture Kashmir through force, India has refused to make any concessions; and, rather, its stance has toughened.⁽³⁾ The official policy of

India with regard to Kashmir is that there will be no changes to the prevailing status quo.(4)

The policymakers in New Delhi believe that Pakistan has put in place a military strategy to bleed India through “a thousand cuts” by continuing its support for militant Islamist groups in Indian-controlled Kashmir and elsewhere.(5)

Whenever there is a sudden surge in violence in Indian-administrated Kashmir, hostilities between India and Pakistan increase at the Line of Control (LoC), which serves as the de facto border between the two countries. The September 18 terrorist attack in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, which left scores of Indian soldiers dead and wounded, was blamed by New Delhi on Pakistan.(6) In retaliation, India, at the end of September 2016, carried out a military “surgical strike” in Pakistan’s controlled Kashmir region. The surgical strike reportedly destroyed number of militant camps in the area.(7) As tensions between the neighbouring countries ratchet up, Islamabad continues to vow use of all defence measures, including nuclear weapons to counter India’s aggression. However, the rhetoric of threat might partly be in response to the building up of public pressure in Pakistan for retaliatory action against India.

The recent flare-up of tensions: reasons for India and Pakistan

The recent killing of a young Kashmiri militant, known as Burhan Wani – allegedly linked with Pakistani based extremist groups – by Indian Army has created a new security challenge for New Delhi in the valley.(8) The violence that erupted in Kashmir in the aftermath of Wani’s death has continued unabated. The protests in Kashmir have forced New Delhi into taking tough measures which has resulted in the death of at least 90 people with thousands reportedly injured.(9)

Pakistan’s increased interference in Kashmir

After the recent tensions in Kashmir, the government in Pakistan has again vowed to support Kashmiri people by highlighting their right and struggle for self-determination. The leadership in Pakistan justifies its so called moral, political and diplomatic support for Kashmiri people as its historic right to support any separatist campaign in the valley, which according to the Subcontinent’s partition agenda, remains unresolved.(10)

The recent violence in the area which New Delhi appears to have failed in containing, has clearly favoured Pakistan’s policy of highlighting Kashmir as an international issue. Besides openly declaring Wani a martyr, Pakistan has augmented its diplomatic pressure on India that has clearly annoyed New Delhi.(11) In order to garner international support, Pakistan has always attempted to internationalise tensions in Kashmir. Pakistan views it as a problem that requires the global community’s immediate attention -- particularly the United Nations (UN) and the Security Council. Undoubtedly, the tensions have reinvigorated the area’s militant propaganda machine with a number of proscribed groups in Pakistan openly calling for Jihad.(12)

India's reaction to Pakistan's recent provocations in Kashmir

To counter Pakistan's recent diplomatic onslaught regarding Kashmir, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government (Prime Minister Narendra Modi is BJP's leader) in India has insisted that much of the resistance in Kashmir is due to Pakistan's support for militant groups in the region.(13) While New Delhi's use of brutal force in Kashmir is deeply concerning, Pakistan's public support for militant groups in Jammu and Kashmir has given India a much needed justification to continue its brutal military campaign to suppress large scale protests. Arguably, Pakistan's policy of using the "low cost-low risk" military option of supporting insurgents in the valley in order to keep the region on boil has been costly. It has weakened and delegitimised Kashmiri's and Islamabad's stance on the issue for this policy offers India an opportunity to ward off international criticism and legitimise its actions.

Is India ending its Strategic Restraint Doctrine?

There has not been any credible evidence of Pakistan's state level support for the recent terrorist attack in Uri. However, India has termed the incident an attack by Pakistani backed militant groups.(14) What is unusual – some might call it unprecedented – about the recent tensions between India and Pakistan is the former's attempt to step out of its long held policy to use the rhetoric of threat and condemnation. It has been India's main instrument of its foreign policy used to vilify and expose Islamabad for supporting terror groups.

India's 'tit for tat' reaction to Pakistan

India has long followed a policy of "strategic restraint" vis-à-vis Pakistan which revolves around avoiding or minimising military confrontation with Pakistan in case of a terrorist attack in India.(15) However, after the recent attack on an Indian military post at Uri, it appears that New Delhi will no longer follow its long held policy of showing military restraint towards Pakistan. Any sort of intervention – conventional or nonconventional – by Pakistan in Kashmir would be met in kind.

Rising domestic pressures

There are two reasons for why Prime Minister Modi cannot continue to stick with India's longstanding policy of showing military restraint towards Pakistan. First, there is rising domestic pressure within India. The public has demanded that New Delhi must adopt a much tougher approach to deal with Pakistan. This has forced Prime Minister Modi's government into taking a much tougher stance towards Islamabad. Moreover, India's inability to contain rising violence in Kashmir and the surging pressure from the BJP's hard-line cadres may have also pushed Prime Minister Modi into taking an extreme position. In particular, the inflamed Indian nationalist passions in the wake of the Uri

attack might have caused serious implications for Modi's government had it not used military force to answer Pakistan's recent provocations in Kashmir.

However, it is equally important to note that besides making public statements, New Delhi has not made public any details of the strikes. The nature of the surgical strikes carried out by Indian security forces in Pakistan's part of the Kashmir has forced many into asking whether the strikes – irrespective of their scale – were meant to punish Pakistan or to assuage domestic warmongers. Voices favouring escalation have been demanding a similar action from Modi led BJP government since it came to power.

Isolation of Pakistan regionally and internationally

Second, regionally and internationally, Pakistan's military and diplomatic manoeuvrings have always frustrated India's plans to expand its military, economic and diplomatic outreach. Pakistan historic conflict on its eastern front with India has always made it uneasy about its western border along Afghanistan. Historically, the assumption in Islamabad has been that India's closeness towards Afghanistan will always be at Pakistan's expense. Therefore, while Pakistan sees this as a 'two-front conflict' situation, it attempts to curtail or eliminate India's influence in Afghanistan and, seek a government in Kabul that is supportive of Islamabad, or at least not antagonistic to it.(16)

Moreover, India's rapidly rising energy needs demand that New Delhi should have access and ability to make use of the Central Asian states energy reserves. Unless India is able to balance or curtail Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, it cannot sufficiently exploit Central Asian energy reserves. New Delhi's growing diplomatic outreach towards Kabul indicates that the former will no longer tolerate Pakistan's interventions in Afghanistan, which have historically undermined India's interests there.(17) In this regard, Kabul has even shown willingness to join India against Pakistan for Islamabad has been blamed for the failure of the Afghan peace process. In addition, while Pakistan's recent counter terrorism plans have decreased terrorist attacks in the country to a great extent, it continues to support Afghan Taliban's and its leadership, believed to be based in Pakistan. The Pakistani Foreign Affairs Advisor, Sartaj Aziz, recently admitted that Pakistan still had significant influence over the Afghan Taliban because the families of group's leadership were based in Pakistan.(18) With Pakistan's leadership unwilling to give up its support for various militant groups as strategic foreign policy tools, India has stepped-up its international campaign to isolate Pakistan regionally and globally. The cancellation of the 2016 SAARC conference in Pakistan because of India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh's refusal to participate in the summit, highlights New Delhi's new found resolve to play a more provocative role in regional affairs through an aggressive diplomacy.(19)

Pakistan's India dilemma

Ensuring security through terror

The leadership in Pakistan often claims that in its bid to divide the country further – Bangladesh is always cited as an example – India has always supported terrorism in Pakistan. From Islamabad's perspective, India's collusion with other regional states – particularly with Afghanistan – puts Pakistan's interests and security at risk. Therefore, Pakistan's leadership, particularly the military, supports a number of Jihadist groups in Kashmir as well as in Afghanistan to counter this threat.

On August 15, 2016, during his Independence Day address, Prime Minister Modi openly talked about India's intervention in Pakistan's troubled Baluchistan province. "From the ramparts of the Red Fort, I want to express my gratitude to some people – the people of Baluchistan, Gilgit, and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir – for the way they wholeheartedly thanked me," Prime Minister Modi remarked .(20) Moreover, India is also considering giving asylum to a Baluchi separatist leader which Pakistan accuses to have links with Indian security agencies.(21) Besides, Prime Minister Modi's statement to help separatist groups in Pakistan was also welcomed and endorsed by Afghanistan's former President, Hamid Karzai.(22) For Pakistan, these events are only a confirmation of India's long held policy of supporting separatist groups in the country, particularly in Pakistan's tribal areas and Baluchistan. Arguably, in this regard, the latter's policy of supporting non-state actors as instruments of foreign policy is only a response to New Delhi's actions despite the fact that it has destroyed the country domestically given Pakistan's growing internal security challenges.

India's growing opposition to CPEC

Pakistan's increased interference in Kashmir, especially after the death of Wani and India's much reported surgical strikes in Pakistan and refusal to act against militant groups targeting Indian interests may be explained by additional motivations. New Delhi may be uneasy about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a bilateral economic project between the two countries that promises to invest more than \$46 billion in the country.(23) Apparently, the leadership in Pakistan believes that India's open hostility towards CPEC, which is being called Islamabad's last economic lifeline, cannot be countered by accommodating New Delhi's demands and threats that also involve reining in militant groups targeting Indian interests. Rather, the current policy in Pakistan is to stand up to Indian threats – regardless of political, diplomatic or military consequences. Historically, Pakistan has always done in the past by employing all available means, including security and diplomatic, to thwart hostile designs by New Delhi.

What is Pakistan's military thinking?

Unlike Pakistan's civilian leadership, the military in Pakistan is averse to any reconciliation with India as long as the latter does not make any meaningful concessions on Kashmir and other strategic security issues. Thus far, the Pakistani military which has significant influence over the country's foreign policy has vetoed any decision by the civilian government to increase trade or other commercial activities with New Delhi. In 2015, Prime Minister Modi's surprise visit to Pakistan during which he met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was neither approved nor appreciated by the Pakistani Army.(24) Recently, the civilian government in Pakistan confronted the country's powerful military leadership for not acting against militant groups targeting Indian and Afghan interests. Hours later, however, the civilian government was forced to reject media reports citing such an encounter for the military in Pakistan does not tolerate any such questioning by the country's elected government.(25) In order to sustain its influence over the country's defence and foreign policy, the military in Pakistan has always instigated protest campaigns through different political and religious parties, aimed at weakening any government in power. Prime Minister Modi's targeting of Pakistan in recent weeks has only strengthened the country's military against the civilian government, which might have favoured reconciliation instead of escalation with India. Now it is Pakistan's military running the show of casting India as the country's existential threat. Thus reconciliation between the two neighbours does not appear likely in the foreseeable future.

What's next for India and Pakistan's bilateral relations?

Another long episode of turmoil

Undoubtedly, the deepening tensions between India and Pakistan are likely to escalate at wider military and diplomatic fronts. The level of distrust between the two states has reached the point where accommodation and reconciliation appear unlikely, at least for now. Pakistan has vowed to highlight India's human rights abuses in Kashmir. It has openly blamed India for a number of recent terrorist attacks in the country. For instance, while responding to a terrorist attack in Quetta that killed more than 60 police officers in late October 2016, the military in Pakistan said that the threat to the country's security was emanating from Afghan soil and was being managed by Indian Intelligence agencies there.(26)

India's hostility, on the other hand, has also augmented with New Delhi calling Pakistan an "Ivy league of terrorism and war criminal."(27) India wants Pakistan to give up its support for militancy in the region that Pakistan – particularly the country's military which controls all militant proxies – is unlikely to do after the recent bilateral military and diplomatic clashes. In particular, after India's military action in Pakistan, Modi's statement on openly intervening in Baluchistan and starting a campaign to isolate

Pakistan globally will only increase Islamabad's support for various India or Afghan-focused militant groups. From here onwards, Pakistan will turn its focus on further exposing India's extreme use of military force in Jammu and Kashmir.

Conclusion

Pakistan and India's historic rivalry has once again brought both countries to the brink of military escalation. India's recent belligerent behaviour will only embolden Pakistan's resolve towards using non-state actors as a means of foreign policy even at the cost of its domestic security. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the rising domestic pressures in India that have demanded the use of military force to respond to Pakistan's provocations will allow any manoeuvring space to Prime Minister Modi as far as immediate reconciliation between India and Pakistan is concerned. Above all, one fears that the two foes' heated confrontation of late – if sustained -- is likely to descend the South Asian region into another cycle of instability where peace may not be even a distant possibility.

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