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India-Pakistan Crisis: A New International Factor

By P S Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

India's "counter-terrorism" strike inside Pakistan and their brief military exchanges have brought into focus China's apparent stake in the stability of Indo-Pakistani relations.

COMMENTARY

WARLIKE HOSTILITIES broke out briefly between India and Pakistan, major South Asian neighbours, on 27 February 2019. The Indian Air Force had, on the previous day, carried out a "pre-emptive" strike in a "counter-terrorism" operation near a place called Balakot in Pakistan.

However, the genesis of this simmering crisis can be traced to the internationally-condemned terrorist attack at a place called Pulwama on the Indian side of the India-Pakistan Line of Control (LoC) on 14 February 2019.

Pulwama Fallout

Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad, proscribed by the United Nations as a terrorist organisation, owned responsibility for the Pulwama attack which killed at least 40 Indian paramilitary personnel. However, Pakistan said the Pulwama attack was "ostensibly" carried out by a "resident" on the Indian side of the LoC, the de facto dividing line.

In this political contestation, a Pakistan-India aerial fight ensued on 27 February. An Indian pilot was captured by Pakistan after his warplane was downed. Moreover, the Indian Air Force asserted that one of its planes shot down a Pakistani fighter aircraft during the same hostilities.

On the same day, Delhi issued a diplomatic demarche to Pakistan on its “act of aggression against India”. Delhi also drew a distinction between Pakistan’s “act” and India’s earlier “counter-terrorism” strike inside Pakistan. In contrast, even before the aerial hostilities, Pakistan wanted the United Nations to “step in to defuse [the rising] tensions”. Islamabad argued that India had, for its own “domestic political reasons” (ahead of its imminent national elections), created this “tense environment”.

As nuclear-armed India and Pakistan continued to disagree on the facts in this grim situation, major powers like the United States (US), China and Russia began evincing active interest. In that ambience, Pakistan released the Indian pilot on 1 March.

The Strategic Chessboard

Often, hostilities and diplomacy go together – not necessarily between the contesting protagonists themselves. Immediately after the Pulwama attack, Washington, which has been seeking closer ties with Delhi in recent times, endorsed India’s “right to self-defence” against terrorism.

Moreover, following India’s “counter-terrorism actions” inside Pakistan on 26 February, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo emphasised Washington’s “close security partnership” with Delhi. At the same time, he underscored “the urgency of Pakistan taking meaningful action against terrorist groups operating on its soil”. He also urged Pakistan to “avoid military action” in response to India’s “counter-terrorism” raid.

Pompeo went on to “encourage [both] India and Pakistan to exercise restraint” and “avoid further military activity” in the wake of Delhi’s “counter-terrorism” action. Although Pompeo’s advice proved ineffective, it is clear that America played for India at the strategic chessboard on this occasion.

Russian President Vladimir Putin telephoned Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 28 February to express Moscow’s “solidarity” with Delhi “in the fight against terrorism”.

China’s ‘Balancing Act’

India’s biggest neighbour, China, has an “all-weather strategic partnership” with Pakistan. However, since Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “informal summit” with Modi at Wuhan (China) in April 2018, Beijing has been trying to grasp Delhi’s worldview better. Unsurprisingly, therefore, China has sought to play a balancing act during the latest Pakistan-India crisis.

After the latest aerial engagement across the LoC, Pakistani Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi made an “emergency telephone call” to Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Pakistan was “hoping” for Beijing’s “constructive role in easing the current [Pakistan-India] tension”. For Pakistan, this was urgent. China had earlier acknowledged that the Pulwama attack was committed by an organisation “already on the [UN] Security Council sanctions list against terrorism”.

Prior to Qureshi’s call on 27 February 2019, Wang Yi met Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, on the margins of the Russia-India-China (RIC) foreign

ministers' meeting at Wuzhen (China). Wang Yi positioned China as “a mutual friend of [both] India and Pakistan”.

Diplomatic ‘Gains’ for India

More significant was Wang Yi's public statement on the RIC “consensus”. He said “the three parties agreed to jointly combat terrorism in all forms”, and “in particular, strive to remove the breeding ground of terrorism and extremist ideas”. By this, China sought to convey that it was now aligning itself closely with India in identifying “the breeding ground of terrorism” as a major issue.

In these circumstances, India was also the “Guest of Honour” at a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) at Abu Dhabi on 1 March. India was invited as an emerging global player; Pakistan, an OIC member, was not pleased at this turn of events. Moreover, no OIC member-state offered to mediate in the stalled India-Pakistan efforts to resolve the issue of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) which remains divided along the Line of Control.

The Way Ahead

The latest Pakistan-India crisis, triggered by a terrorist attack, acquired a military dimension and rung alarm bells. Both America and China, with strategic and economic frictions between themselves, have common but differential stakes in the stability of India-Pakistan relations. While America appears to tilt towards India, China is Pakistan's “partner”.

Despite the warming Sino-Indian sound bites, Beijing has not altered its economic and strategic calculus regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Delhi, therefore, remains opposed to the CPEC which passes through an area that Pakistan controls and India regards as its sovereign territory.

However, China has the unusual stake of safeguarding the CPEC from Pakistan-India hostilities. In the near term, this offers Delhi a challenging opportunity to explore how far China can influence Pakistan in its attitude towards India. Pakistan may look for the opposite effect. The long term configuration of China-India-Pakistan relations will of course depend on the comprehensive national strength and strategic autonomy of each player.

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