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India-Pakistan Tensions: Back to the Future in South Asia?

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The relative stabilisation of India-Pakistan relations following the US intervention in Afghanistan was an exception rather than the norm. The recent developments in the region indicate a return to the old patterns of rivalry, with added complexities for proxy wars beyond Kashmir.

Commentary

WHEN THE United States was drawing down troops from Afghanistan in December 2014, there was much debate about the possible implications of this development on the South Asian security landscape, especially the India-Pakistan rivalry. The period following the US intervention in Afghanistan witnessed relative stabilisation of the political disputes, territorial conflicts, and border hostilities between India and Pakistan.

On its part, the US made sure that the regional animosity between the two South Asian arch-foes did not undermine its mission in Afghanistan. Washington used its diplomatic clout and other means to keep the trouble-prone Indo-Pak ties on the course of normalisation.

The Pacifist View

The academic analyses and opinions of policymakers diverged widely on the possible impact of the US drawdown on South Asia. One school of thought argued that the US presence fundamentally altered the realities of the region. During this period, the American role as a mediator between India and Pakistan made conventional war between the two neighbours unlikely because it would be a costly

option. Among the factors are the introduction of several confidence building measures; the 2003 border ceasefire agreement; Pakistani assurances to clampdown on anti-India militant groups, and stop cross-border infiltration in the Indian Kashmir; along with expansion and improvement of the nuclear programmes of the two countries.

According to this school, this was the beginning of a new era of peace-making and possible conflict resolution in South Asia. This opinion largely came from the pacifist South Asian lobby comprising former diplomats, scholars, journalists and peace activists who remained actively engaged in several Track II initiatives between India and Pakistan.

They believed that an increasing level of people-to-people contact, interaction of the two countries' civil societies and, more importantly, the interaction of the youth on social media, created a new constituency for peace which was irreversible and capable of altering the adversarial history of the subcontinent.

The Realist View

The other school of thought comprised the realists who upheld that the post-9/11 India-Pakistan normalisation under the US umbrella was an exception rather than a rule. They emphatically maintained that American presence as a mediator can but temporarily suppress hostilities between the two rivals.

The host of initiatives introduced during this period had a shelf-life which would expire with the US exit from Afghanistan. Arguably, the entire process of 'normalisation' was a make-shift arrangement that did not alter the structural realities of the region i.e. resolution of the Kashmir conflict, Siachen or Sir Creek issues.

This second point of view received further credence in the face of divergent strategic postures of Washington and Islamabad, with Pakistan accusing the US for being selective in its counter-terrorism campaign. Moreover, the transactional relationship between Pakistan and US was confined to certain specific issues as opposed to the wide-ranging Indo-US strategic relations. Indo-US ties extended from strengthening economic partnerships to building India as a counter-weight to China, as well as cooperation in the civilian nuclear field. It is becoming increasingly obvious that America's long-term regional and global interests were being realigned with India, not Pakistan.

Return of Old Patterns of Rivalry

Regional developments in the recent past indicate that the old patterns of adversarial relations between Indian and Pakistan are returning to South Asia with added complexities and expanded turfs for proxy wars. The Indian efforts to portray Pakistan as "state-sponsoring-terrorism" and Pakistan's bid to internationalise the Kashmir issue are reminiscent of the 90s era when the two rivals were engaged in a tit-for-tat tussle at every regional and international forum.

A new and significant dimension of this old pattern is India's growing closeness to the US and Pakistan's estrangement from the latter. Meanwhile, India has also

incorporated the Baloch separatist leaders and Afghanistan in its orbit to increase pressure on Pakistan.

Truth is the first casualty of war: following the Uri attack, we may never know conclusively whether the attackers came from the LOC or Indian-Occupied Kashmir. Moreover, it is questionable whether the attack was India's false flag operation to divert international attention, ahead of the United Nations General Assembly session; from being a perpetrator of state violence to a victim of terrorism; or whether the attackers in fact came from one of the Kashmiri militant groups. Truth will be lost in the war of allegations and counter-allegations between India and Pakistan.

However, what is certain is that New Delhi's bid to hide its state oppression against the Kashmiris under the accusations of cross-border terrorism will not change the ground reality. In the last two months, the killings of Muzaffar Wani and 84 other Kashmiris by the Indian forces to suppress the anti-India protests have provoked the Kashmir movement.

Similarly, Pakistan's reluctance to (meaningfully) act against terrorist networks of all hues and colours indiscriminately will not help in its efforts to force India to open negotiations on the subject of Kashmir. At the same time, Pakistan's slow and lacklustre pursuit of the Mumbai attack case has only strengthened the international impression that the country is dragging its feet on the issue to protect its so-called jihadi assets.

Way Forward

The warmongering by hawks on both sides will further aggravate the already precarious situation in the region. Notwithstanding its superior conventional might, India does not possess the skills, knowledge and technical resources to conduct precision airstrikes or ground hot-pursuit inside the Pakistani territory. Even if it does, it is highly unlikely that Pakistan will be deterred from pursuing its goals in Kashmir.

At the same time, Pakistan's warnings of using tactical nuclear weapons in case India activates the Cold Start Doctrine carries the inherent risk of nuclear retaliation from India. In short, one step up the proverbial escalatory ladder from either side can lead to unforeseen and unintended consequences beyond the control of both adversaries. Hence, saner elements on both sides should try to de-escalate the current atmosphere of war hysteria and earnest efforts must be made to restart the stalled peace process.

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