

Indian bravado on Pakistan is dangerously risky when the China border crisis is on

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Pakistan is in a crisis. Its economy is in the doldrums despite negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a fresh bailout and credit lines from Saudi Arabia to preserve its depleting foreign-exchange reserves. Its domestic politics is doing no better. The recently deposed Prime Minister Imran Khan has undertaken massive public mobilisation against the Shehbaz Sharif-led government, with the Pakistani Army and judiciary also getting singled in the bargain. The security situation, whether in Baluchistan or on the Afghanistan border, is precarious. It is threatening the progress of the prestigious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.



Caravan Columns

To many Indians, this must be a matter of great satisfaction. It is schadenfreude. Not that India is in great shape either, with the economy in free fall, China still occupying territory in Ladakh after two years, Hindu-supremacist violence against Muslims across the country, and a proud democracy in debility. But considering India's size, population and geographical location, the West wants New Delhi on its side against China, despite increasing discussions of India's shortcomings in the global press. After United States forces pulled out of Afghanistan, leaving its people at the mercy of the Taliban, Pakistan lost the limited western interest it held.

In popular global discourse, India is no longer hyphenated with Pakistan. Despite New Delhi's great desire, it would be silly to assume that India is hyphenated with Beijing either. India's economy in terms of gross domestic product is one-fifth that of China's, and Beijing's geopolitical heft is second only to Washington.

The gap between India and China has widened under Narendra Modi's prime ministerial watch, such that he finds himself incapable of reversing the Chinese ingress into Indian territory in Ladakh even after two years. This was evident from northern army commander lieutenant general Upendra Dwivedi's invocation of "strategic patience" as a strategy in earlier this month. "We are ready for a negotiation. If it is prolonged, we are going to wait," he had added. This shock from the People's Liberation Army has jolted India's strategic apparatus into action. After years of talking about it, diplomatic and military energies have now been oriented towards China. While diplomatic and political talks with China, such as foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to Delhi in late March, are grabbing the headlines in Indian media, military forces which were earmarked for fighting with Pakistan have been diverted with primary responsibilities on the China border. For example, the primary task of Mathura-based Strike Corps, one of India's three corps reserved to seize high value territory in Pakistan, has been changed to guarding the Chinese border in Ladakh. Other military formations have been tasked with new responsibilities such as six army divisions from the Pakistani front were assigned to the Chinese border, as reported by India Today on 15 May.

Accompanying this shift is the dominant political reality in today's India. Modi and his government do not mention China or the ongoing military challenge in public discourse. Their whole attempt, starting from Modi, has been to downplay the crisis. Take for instance Modi's comment in an all-party meeting on 19 June 2020, where he said, "No one has intruded and nor is anyone intruding, nor has any post been captured by someone," four days after 20 Indian soldiers had died in a clash with the PLA. After severe criticism from the opposition, that comment was excised in a video recording put up by the Prime Minister's official Twitter handle despite it having been carried previously on live television.

But unlike earlier in his administrations, Pakistan does not find any mention in Modi's political speeches since the Ladakh border crisis began. This is unlikely to be out of any great love for Pakistan or a desire to have peace with Islamabad. It is forced by the chilling terror of activating a two-front collusive military threat from China and Pakistan that will overwhelm India. This is something the army is all too aware of. On his last day as army chief, general MM Naravane conceded that an "engagement on both the fronts simultaneously would be challenging." That is why India desperately used the United Arab Emirates to open lines of communication with Pakistan's army in late 2020, which resulted in the reiteration of a ceasefire on the Line of Control. Even though there has been no progress on talks since then, the bare lines of communication with Rawalpindi have remained open since.

Historically, crises between India and Pakistan have, on occasion, been triggered as a result of violent actions on Indian soil by Islamist militant group or rogue elements based in Pakistan. As Hindutva forces have turned belligerent in targeting Muslims in India, that danger has expanded to include radicalised Hindu-supremacist elements in India. One of the worrying possibilities with the recent misfiring of a BrahMos missile from an Indian Air Force base into Pakistan was that a rogue actor had gotten control of the weapon system and launched the missile into enemy territory. As no confidence-building measures have been taken after the misfiring, the risk of another accident leading to a military escalation remains.

Modi's stunning electoral victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls was on the back of an airstrike at a seminary in Balakot in northern Pakistan, after the Pulwama suicide car-bombing on 14 February that year. The political incentive for an encore as he heads for another general election in 2024 remains high, only if a reason is made available to him to order another strike. That has been made clear by his national security advisor, Ajit Doval, in a chapter in the new book, *Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery*. While the cross-LoC surgical strike of 2016 was land-based and the Balakot strike was aerial, Doval writes that "tomorrow, it may be different from both if the adversary again causes disproportionate casualties." He warns that, "Domain and level will not be inhibiting factors," which means that nothing is off the table were Modi to order a strike on Pakistan again.

More worryingly, Doval argues that the Balakot strike "blew away the myth of Pakistan's nuclear blackmail." Considering that India and Pakistan were close to shooting missiles at each other in the wake of the Balakot strike, when an Indian fighter jet was downed by

Pakistan and its pilot captured, this assertion is more boastful than thought through. Pakistan remains a declared nuclear weapon state and India must forego bravado when preparing for the full capabilities of its adversary. As leaders the world over have learnt over time, no one controls the escalation ladder when it comes to conflict. When the conflict is between two nuclear powers the risks of escalation become manifold.

During the 2019 Balakot crisis, the tense situation was defused by the rapid intervention of western powers, mainly the United States, which had a prominent voice in Islamabad at the time. But its ties have hit a nadir since their military left Afghanistan. Imran Khan's Pakistan was likely one of the few countries whose head of government had not received a call from United States President Joe Biden. Very few top United States officials, who line up regularly at Delhi, pay a visit to Islamabad or Rawalpindi. There is little possibility of this changing, as Pakistan is seen to be China's trusted lackey, and the mood in the Biden administration is strongly anti-China. No worthwhile relationships with Pakistani officials have been built by United States officials during this period, the one thing that counts during a crisis. Working the telephone lines or shuttling down to Islamabad may not have the same effect now, as it used to have during the earlier crisis.

Adding to the precarious scenario is Pakistan's "iron brother" relationship with China, which means that only Beijing can force Islamabad into a favourable action. If India's tensions with China remain as they are—suggested by the Northern Army Commander articulating "strategic patience" as a strategy—then Beijing is unlikely to work to lessen India's discomfiture. The nightmare scenarios of a two-front collusive threat or Pakistan as a subset of a bigger Chinese threat could then materialise, testing India's military strength and diplomatic nous. It is a test no sensible leader in New Delhi would hope to subject India to.

To avoid such a calamitous situation, India has to start engaging with Pakistan through diplomatic and political means, not via intelligence operatives alone. Public gestures will go a long way in assuaging the anxieties and insecurities about India in the Pakistani establishment. For Modi, after his anti-Pakistan rhetoric, it will be a bitter pill to swallow to make that move towards Islamabad. But a stable and secure Pakistan is to India's advantage, because a politically rickety and economically fragile nuclear power can be dangerously irrational in its assessment of a hostile bigger neighbour's actions. And that is a risk India does not need to take.