India-Pakistan ties and the mirror of 2019

There are sound reasons why New Delhi must shift course from the belligerence it once profited from

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An official delegation from Pakistan was in New Delhi on Monday to hold talks with its Indian counterparts under the aegis of the Indus Water Treaty. In March, the Indians had gone to Islamabad to attend the previous meeting. Starting from February, India has been sending through Pakistan consignments of wheat, via the World Food Programme, to the Taliban-run Afghanistan.

Evidently, channels of communication between the two governments are working and open hostility has subsided, if not vanished completely. In his speeches, Prime Minister Narendra Modi no longer targets Pakistan as an enemy country or invokes it to target politicians of Opposition parties, a regular feature till a few years ago. This is not because of a sudden change of heart or out of great love for Pakistan. The change has been driven by realist considerations that surfaced during the Ladakh border crisis on the Line of Actual Control with China in the summer of 2020.

China forced the hand

The border crisis in Ladakh raised the spectre of a collusive military threat between China and Pakistan. As various military leaders have since stated, such a challenge cannot be effectively dealt with by the military alone and would need all the instruments of the state – diplomatic, economic, informational, and military – to act in concert. To prevent such a situation, India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval opened backchannel talks with Pakistan, using the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as an interlocutor.

This was confirmed by the UAE's Ambassador to the United States, as the Indian and Pakistan armies agreed to a reiteration of the ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir in February 2021.

It was a U-turn for the Modi government, after the dilution of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, and the number of ceasefire violations along the LoC had reached a record high in 2020. In line with Home Minister Amit Shah's statement in Parliament vowing to wrest back Pakistan-occupied Kashmir – and Aksai Chin from China – every other politician from the Bharatiya Janata Party politician was threatening Pakistan. By then, the Indian Army was boasting of its firepower on the LoC.

It thus came as a surprise that Mr. Doval had agreed in his backchannel talks with the Pakistan Army to undertake certain actions in Kashmir as part of a mutually agreed road map. Reports emanating from Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa made it clear that two actions by India were a precondition for any further steps by Pakistan: restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir; and an announcement of no demographic change in the Kashmir Valley.

As the backchannel talks dragged on, the Indian side expressed its political inability to initiate these actions. With Imran Khan (now former Prime Minister) refusing to move ahead, it created a stalemate. By then, limited disengagement had occurred with the Chinese forces in Ladakh, thus stabilising the situation along the LAC to some extent. India gave assurances to Pakistan when the threat of escalation with China became very high in late 2020 following the Indian Army's occupation of certain heights in the Kailash range in Ladakh. Pakistan had then not shown any inclination to mobilise its forces to the LoC, which would have created a nightmare scenario for the Indian security establishment. Even if there was no further progress in bilateral ties, the Indians were happy with this new status quo with Pakistan while the border crisis with China was alive. This bought them time to further consolidate the changes in Kashmir undertaken in August 2019.

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Kashmir suffers

The delimitation of Assembly constituencies in Kashmir has been completed. The fresh making of an electoral map disadvantages Kashmiris, and new Assembly elections seem but a matter of time. That would bring closer the BJP's dream of installing a Hindu Chief Minister in India's only Muslim-majority region, an attempt made earlier after the sacking of Mehbooba Mufti as Chief Minister. If these efforts are successful, the statehood to Jammu and Kashmir could also be restored.

However, despite a harsh security-centric approach by the administration, violence in the region has gone up in the past year or so. All the resources of the Indian state have now been devoted towards a successful conduct of the Amarnath Yatra, with a record participation this year, even as the same administration bans Friday prayers at the iconic Jamia Masjid in Srinagar using the flimsiest of excuses. Congregational prayers were disallowed at the historic mosque last Friday after the sentencing of Kashmiri separatist leader Yasin Malik. His sentencing also earned a strong statement of condemnation from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that was rejected by India's Foreign Ministry. Things have changed drastically from February 2019, when the then External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was invited as the "guest of honour" by the OIC.

Islamabad's rhetoric helps the Modi government make its case domestically that the crisis in Kashmir is solely of Pakistan's making. While Pakistan's use of violence by sending weapons and militants has been a major factor, exploiting it to overlook the political grievances of Kashmiris thwarts a lasting solution. The idea that Kashmiris have no agency of their own and are instruments in the hands of the Pakistan military defies both history and common sense.

No environment in Pakistan

The recent change of government in Pakistan, including Imran Khan's removal, is seen as a positive in New Delhi. The official Indian establishment has had close ties with both the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan Peoples Party that are now part of the government. There are Indian businessmen who have acted as interlocutors with the Sharif brothers on behalf of the Modi government. Mr. Modi had himself made a sudden stopover at the Sharif household in December 2015 to attend a family wedding, and subsequently allowed Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officials to visit Pathankot airbase for terror attack investigation.

Officials on both sides argue that there are some low-hanging fruits which can be plucked the moment a political go-ahead is given. These include a deal on the Sir Creek dispute, an agreement for revival of bilateral trade, return of High Commissioners to the missions in Delhi and Islamabad, and build-up of diplomatic missions to their full strength. Demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier is still seen to be off the table as the Indian proposal is believed to be unacceptable to the Pakistan Army.

The environment in Pakistan is, however, not conducive for any such move. Imran Khan is garnering big crowds in his support and has put the Shehbaz Sharif government and Pakistan Army under pressure. With the economy in doldrums, there is little room for manoeuvre with the new government. Even an announcement of talks with India, without New Delhi conceding anything on Kashmir, will provide further ammunition to Imran Khan. The current moment, where New Delhi and Islamabad seem willing to move forward but are restrained by Pakistan's domestic politics, somewhat mirrors the lawyers' protest against General Musharraf in 2008 which derailed the Manmohan-Musharraf talks after they had nearly agreed on a road map.

New environment

A window of opportunity would possibly open in Pakistan after the next elections, which are scheduled next year but could be held earlier. By then, the Pakistan Army would have a new army chief, as Gen. Bajwa's three-year extension comes to an end in November. Gen. Bajwa's successor may look at things differently. By then, if Jammu and Kashmir has a new State government after elections and the border crisis with Beijing is resolved, the ground would have completely shifted in India. As Mr. Modi goes for another re-election in 2024 with little to show on the economy front, a totally different dynamics on Pakistan would be at play in India.

Following the Balakot airstrike (2019), Pakistan was at the forefront of Mr. Modi's election campaign in 2019. In a recent book chapter, Mr. Doval has written that Balakot "blew away the myth of Pakistan's nuclear blackmail". For the next strike on Pakistan, "domain and level will not be limiting factors", he wrote.

Mr. Doval does not mention it but last time, India lost a fighter aircraft, had its pilot in Pakistani captivity, shot down its own helicopter killing seven men, had another near-miss friendly fire accident over Rajasthan, and the two nuclear-armed countries threatened to shoot missiles at each other. That was in 2019. A reckless act in the future may have even more dire consequences. Unless that is what India desires, the Modi government must shift course from the belligerence it has displayed and profited from earlier in favour of proper diplomatic and political engagement with Pakistan.

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