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May 9, 2023, 19:13 IST



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No country can choose its neighbours. What India can do is have an honest conversation with Pakistan. The foreign ministers' exchange at the SCO meet was a failure of diplomacy

The propensity of India and Pakistan to hijack a multilateral meeting, with the drama surrounding their bilateral relationship, has acquired a stupendous status in recent times.

What was once the scourge of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summits, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) meets and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) sessions — creating a distraction from substantive issues — now has blighted the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings as well. Unfortunately, the absurdity was on full display at the meeting of foreign ministers of SCO countries in Goa.

At the outset, both India and Pakistan are not major players at the SCO grouping. China towers over it like a colossus and Russia has greater geopolitical influence over member countries than India. The official languages of the grouping are also Chinese and Russian, with Indian efforts to have English as an official language not bearing fruit so far.

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S Jaishankar with Bilawal Bhutto at the SCO meet in Goa (Photo: PTI)



More importantly, the SCO meetings have so far been either about Afghanistan or Central Asia, or in providing photo opportunities to showcase a grouping that excludes the West, particularly the G7 and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) countries.

Not much was expected from the Goa SCO meeting. However, the decision of Pakistani foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to attend the event led to some excitement. Embarrassingly, it did both nations more harm than good.

What went wrong?

Bhutto was the first Pakistani foreign minister to visit India in 11 years. His colleague in the defence ministry had not attended the meeting of defence ministers a few days earlier in New Delhi, not even virtually, leaving it to an official to mark Pakistan's presence.

Unlike the defence minister, Bhutto comes with a different pedigree. Both his mother and grandfather were prime ministers and his father was the president of Pakistan. Notably, the young minister had not minced his words in describing the Indian prime minister in rather harsh terms in New York last year.

Watch: Bilawal insults Indian PM at UN meet



When it came to poise and language, however, foreign minister S Jaishankar fared no better. In the pre-meet dinner, where he shook hands with Bhutto, India as the host country kept the media out so that no images showed that the foreign ministers of two nuclear-weapon states could engage with civility and poise.

At the start of the meeting, welcoming each participating foreign minister, Jaishankar resorted to a namaste to again avoid being caught in pictures shaking hands with Bhutto. But this was nothing compared to the slanging match in their media interactions.

They were nasty and threatening, trying to show the other country down. But the target audience was neither the one being insulted nor the delegations of other participating nations. The verbal diatribes were strictly meant for their respective audiences back home, with no intentions of being diplomatic.

Surely, this exchange would have helped Jaishankar, who is a newfound favourite of social media trolls, raise his stock with them and be deemed successful. On the other hand, Bhutto, who doesn't have the maniacal following of an Imran Khan, would have won appreciation with the generals in Rawalpindi. In all, it was a brazen display of domestic politics in the garb of diplomacy.

Missed opportunity

Diplomacy is about engagement, starting and carrying on a conversation even at the most complicated times, and navigating through the swathe of conflicting interests and entrenched positions to find some space to manoeuvre. That is how solutions to vexed problems have been found globally.

And, India is no stranger to this kind of diplomacy even today. China has denied India control of more than 2,000sq km of territory in Ladakh and refuses to concede that the bilateral relationship is not normal because of the border issue. But the government continues to engage with the Chinese and talk to them regularly.

Jaishankar himself has met his Chinese counterpart twice this year without being able to register any progress. Defence minister Rajnath Singh met his Chinese counterpart last month. A diplomatic team from New Delhi was in Beijing in February for the working mechanism for consultation and coordination on India-China border affairs talks, while New Delhi continues to request for more rounds of corps commander level talks in Ladakh even though the Chinese refused to concede an inch.



Defence minister Rajnath Singh with his Chinese counterpart Li Shangfu in New Delhi. Despite the LAC standoff, India continues to engage with China and talk regularly (Photo: PTI)

The Chinese may have been intransigent and inconsiderate about Indian concerns but that has not stopped India from seeking avenues for engagement with them at political, diplomatic and military levels. Let alone spewing insults at Beijing, India has never issued a demarche to a Chinese diplomat about the border crisis in the past three years.

Moreover, India and Pakistan have had a very patchy record of diplomatic engagement in the past 25 years. The two countries instituted a structured dialogue in June 1997, and it broke down later that year itself.

It was then resumed in late 1998 and again broke down once the Pakistani intrusions were detected in Kargil leading to a limited war. Even though Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Gen Pervez Musharraf held

the much-hyped Agra summit in 2001 — which failed spectacularly — the dialogue was resumed once again in 2004.

India stopped the talks after the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. The dialogue resumed in February 2011, but was stalled again in January 2013 after an incident on the Line of Control (LoC). Ten years later, a structured dialogue has been replaced by the rhetoric of no dialogue with Pakistan.

The truth is somewhat different. Under pressure from China and worried about a two-front collusive threat from Pakistan and China in 2020, the government approached the UAE as an interlocutor to cool tempers on the LoC.



People mourn the death of soldier Neelam Singh, who was killed by militants in J&K. Because of the standoff with China, India has been forced to play down such attacks (Photo: AP)

The backchannel was led by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and it successfully led to the reiteration of a ceasefire on the LoC.

Reports suggest that the backchannel is still functional, but only to prevent a crisis that India can't afford at this time. Because of the military commitment with China, India has been allegedly forced to play down major militant attacks on its soldiers in Jammu and Kashmir in recent days. It simply doesn't have the capability to take any punitive action.

In that sense, Jaishankar's stance in Goa seems a cover for that weakness in India's capabilities. It satisfies the constituency of blind supporters without creating any risk of escalation with Pakistan. If the reports of backchannel engagement are true, the Goa episode also confirms a major failure in India's foreign policy.

No country can choose its neighbours. India must live with Pakistan, along with the unfortunate reality that this is a country where a strong military controls nuclear weapons even as it is plagued by a crashing economy, imploding polity and failing society.

India needs to deal with its biggest internal challenge (Kashmir) and its biggest external challenge (China). That path can only be created in a space opened by an honest conversation with Pakistan. It has no other choice. Nothing else will address the complexity of the situation facing India in Pakistan or serve India's interests.

The writer is Senior Fellow at Centre for Policy Research.



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