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**Understanding the ceasefire**

Amidst the massive national focus on the legal and political events in the run-up to the Senate elections, something of import happened on the Pakistan-India front that has the potential to open up space for a low-level engagement between Islamabad and New Delhi.

The announcement of a ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control (LoC), which was originally signed in 2003, is the first significant step forward in a bilateral relationship that has been on a steep decline ever since Indian Prime Minister Modi swept to power in his second term.

Another way of gauging the importance of this engagement is to juxtapose it in the context of Modi’s unilateral annexation of Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir as well as the post-Pulwama military stand-off that could have spiraled into a full-fledged war with Pakistan.

The post-August 2019 bilateral landscape has been shaped by the BJP government’s ideological mission to not only refashion the idea of India through a reconfiguration of the country’s legal, political, and social institutions but also dictate terms to Pakistan by reducing the whole gamut of bilateral relations to a single-issue mantra of “cross-border terrorism.”

As the Modi Sarkar upped the ante in an attempt to play hardball with Islamabad, his chauvinistic policies and increasingly narrow worldview shaped by a combination of his RSS-driven political training, the zero-sum national security mindset of Ajit Doval, and Jaishankar’s idea of India’s global prominence disincentivized the Pakistani civil and military leadership.

The ceasefire agreement is certainly great news for those living across the LoC who have been the target of massive shelling and exchange of heavy fire for the last many years. According to the Pakistani security officials, as many as three thousand incidents of the violations of the LoC were recorded in 2020 alone that resulted in huge losses in man and material.

The Indian border forces did not even spare the two officers of the United Nations Military Observer Group (UNMOG) as they targeted the vehicle carrying them on routine patrol duty, a move described by Pakistan as a “new low”.

Though it is too early to describe the ceasefire agreement as denoting something meaningful in the context of highly volatile relations, the development does bring us to consider why India relented on its hawkish policy. The following is instructive in this regard:

First, the losses in lives and prestige suffered by India in a protracted military stand-off with China have dented Modi’s impression of a macho leader. As a series of incidents spanning over the last many months have shown, the hubris of the Indian leaders and the so-called strategic fallacies of its military planners have been exposed for what they are: just fallacies powered by a grandiose ambition of establishing regional dominance. The face-off with Beijing has had a humbling effect on the Indian leaders, serving as a much-needed reality check.

Second, New Delhi’s consistent campaign to paint Pakistan in a bad light with an intent to isolate the country diplomatically has failed miserably. The busting of India’s vast clandestine disinformation network by the EU DisInfoLab a couple of months ago has shown the world the true face of its current crop of leaders as well as the reality of Indian democracy that faces a terminal challenge from the ruling Hindutva ideology.

Contrary to the Indian efforts, Pakistan continues to remain relevant and very much part of the global conversation. The Biden Administration has expressed its willingness to work with Islamabad in terms of bringing the Afghan conflict to an end as well as putting the US-Pakistan relationship on its own trajectory away from the transactional nature of the ties.

As of now, Pakistan may not have come off the FATF’s grey list but its compliance with 24 out of 27 action plans has been most impressive, neutralizing the Indian agenda of keeping Islamabad on the global radar with a “compromised financial system”.

Third, India’s human rights record has never been exposed the way it has been in recent months, starting with New Delhi’s August 5 action of revoking the special status of Kashmir. The imposition of curfew and a complete information blockade of the valley has only been followed by the worst human rights abuses.

The world came to know, probably for the first time, how the Indian government has presided over a brute apparatus that not only deprived Kashmiris of their UN-mandated political and legal rights but also subjected them to systematic torture for raising their voice.

The Modi government’s troubles escalated as it unleashed a reign of terror on Indian citizens who protested its draconian measures such as the Citizenship Act as well as the recent ongoing farmers’ movement that has rattled the country. The massive outrage against pop singer Rihanna and young climate change activist Greta Thunberg for speaking up in support of the agitating farmers represents a new low for Indian democracy that cannot stand a couple of critical opinions.

Brand ‘Modi’ has got a massive hit globally. It is incomprehensible for the international community why India continues to refuse to dial down the hostilities and engage Pakistan when the military stand-off only a couple of years ago brought the world to the scary prospect of a potential nuclear catastrophe in South Asia.

The default Pakistani position for any kind of reengagement with India has been the restoration of the pre-August 5 status quo, something which makes eminent sense given the fact that the Indian action did not leave the Pakistani leadership with many options.

However, the cold peace, as the watchers of the Indo-Pakistan politics have described the revival of the ceasefire agreement, may still mark a baby step forward, indicating the realization that the path of confrontation will only increase the costs for both countries.

Prime Minister Imran Khan was quick to welcome the ceasefire agreement, and rightly pointed out the fact that the responsibility to create “an enabling environment for further progress” lies with India.

In a significant statement last month, at the graduation ceremony of the 144th GD (P) Engineering Course at PAF Academy, Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa stated: “It is time to extend a hand of peace in all directions”.

The fact that a small measure such as the ceasefire agreement is being celebrated as progress speaks to the intricate and deeply problematic nature of the bilateral relations between Pakistan and India.

The agreement has alerted those elements that see no wisdom in any kind of engagement and profit from an environment of continued hostility and tension. There have been voices in the Pakistani media that questioned the agreement in the absence of any meaningful concession from India. This is not the right thing to do.

The formidable challenge in the way of a forward movement in talks lies in scaling back fiery rhetoric. More so the case when PM Modi has invested his political capital in an anti-Pakistan campaign, a political approach that sucked the oxygen out of the bilateral space, raising the cost for any Indian political party that fancies any notions to work with Islamabad.

As long as Modi keeps defining his country’s foreign policy from the standpoint of domestic politics, he will find it increasingly impossible to introduce confidence-building measures, leave alone reversing the annexation of Kashmir.

India-Pakistan relations are mired in a deep pit. With the current thinking on display in New Delhi vis-a-vis Pakistan, it will be a miracle that the situation can be salvaged. It will not be fair to expect anything from Pakistan after it has already spent its capital in trying to start a dialogue with India.

The international community has a job cut out to nudge Modi towards the path of peace and reconciliation.

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