**Strategic Pause between the Nuclear Neighbours**

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There may be multiple reasons for the breakup of formal and informal talks between India and Pakistan, but it is important to note that the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) is holding ground. The strict implementation of the ceasefire of 2003 provides much-needed relief from the fear of fire and flash to the people of Kashmir living on both sides of the LoC.

Pakistan has been making efforts to engage India in talks on all disputes, including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir. However, India keeps avoiding bilateral or multilateral engagement, or even a discussion on Kashmir for multiple reasons of its own. India fears that a compromised solution of Kashmir might lead to its Balkanisation because several smaller states are demanding separation from Indian Union. Moreover, India considers Kashmir as the symbol of its secularist ideology and cannot afford to forgo the state based on religious majority, although British India itself was partitioned on the same grounds.

In fact, the situation in South Asia is far from being normal. Both India and Pakistan are faced with a two-front scenario: India in its east with China in Ladakh region and the west with Pakistan over J&K. Whereas, Pakistan in its east with India and post-US Afghanistan on its west. In this background, Pravin Sawhney, a noted defence analyst from India, tweeted on July 14, 2021, that “PLA recent build-up in Ladakh shows they hold cards. They will continue to put pressure short of war & gain a lot in terms of understanding the Indian mil[itary] option. India mil[itary] is no match to PLA. Without cooperation or restoration of 370, the ground situation will keep deteriorating.”

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Pravin’s statement is significant because it sounds very familiar in the domain of strategy of warfare. In fact, India has been following the same strategy of threatening Pakistan for a short, swift, and destructive war just under the nuclear threshold.

Under the evolving situation, the probabilities of Pulwama-like stage-managed operations cannot be ruled out. A tit-for-tat strategy may not always work, as it did in February 2019. Moreover, it carries the risks of escalation, which may have its unknown consequences; a glimpse of the same could be seen on June 26, 2021, when two drones crashed on the roof of an IAF building in Jammu Air Force Station, causing minor damage to the installations. As expected, Pakistan has been mentioned to have provided the equipment and support for the subject attack. However, this time India did not succeed in getting enough support or even sympathy from any notable Capital. But, India did raise the issue in the UN through its Special Secretary (Internal Security) who said, “The world needs to pay serious attention to the possibility of the use of weaponised drones for terrorist activities against strategic assets.”

In fact, Pakistan should have called for an investigation in the matter by the UN.

In this complex, uncertain, and volatile evolving environment, the probabilities of miscalculations and misadventures have grown manifold and needs to be addressed on priority. However, the two nuclear neighbours are not on talking terms. The formal relations are broken since August 5, 2019, when India unilaterally abrogated its Constitution’s article 370 and 35A, which accorded certain autonomy to the state of J&K. Recent efforts of behind-the-door diplomatic efforts have also gone in the background and discontinued until India retreats on its earlier actions of August 5.

I have written this before also that unfortunately, India is a difficult and arrogant neighbour, and therefore, we must not expect that India would deviate from its stated position on the active disputes without being under extraordinary pressure from extra-regional powers or institutions. Pakistan’s efforts for peace should not be seen as a sign of weakness, as some analysts are suggesting, but from high moral ground, because post-US Afghanistan’s evolving situation is extremely uncertain and dangerous, and it may engulf the entire region once again. Moreover, India might feel the heat from China and try to exploit the situation in Afghanistan by supporting elements who are propagating that Pakistan is not doing enough to control Taliban accesses towards Kabul. Moreover, India’s BJP government has been creating situations, like Pulwama in the past, which can be exploited to gain sympathy and support for political purposes. Therefore, in my opinion, absolutely no contact between the nuclear neighbours is an alarming situation in the evolving regional environment.

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