

# India fumbles against Pakistan

**P**AKISTAN has turned into the Mecca of international terrorism even as its new prime minister, Imran "Taliban" Khan, has promised to make his country a Medina-like welfare state. Pakistan, however, is battling a deepening financial crisis, largely exacerbated by its "all-weather" ally, China. Beijing has imposed unfair deals on, and stepped up capital-goods exports to Pakistan under its so-called Belt and Road Initiative.

The military-manipulated election that brought Khan to power, instead of providing much-needed stability to Pakistan, is likely to inject more turmoil. A supporter of the military-backed jihadists and a religious zealot himself, Khan in February married his burqa-clad 'spiritual guide', who now also serves as his political guide.

The Pakistani military has waged an undeclared war against India since the 1980s. But now that an internationally isolated Pakistan, with its economy in dire straits, is seeking an international bailout package, the military generals there, for tactical reasons, want 'peace' talks with India while remaining engaged in aggression. Through such talks, they also wish to legitimise the government they helped to install.

## Past not paid heed to

Yet this is exactly what Prime Minister Narendra Modi risked doing by initially agreeing to a bilateral foreign ministers' meeting. The meeting, on the sidelines of the UN general assembly, would have represented the first high-level contact between India and Pakistan since early 2016, when talks were suspended after the Pakistan-scripted terrorist attack on the Pathankot air force base. Despite frequent terrorist outrages, such a meeting would have signalled a thaw in India-Pakistan relations. Fortunately, the Modi government had the good sense to reverse its decision.

It should not be forgotten that another BJP PM, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, legitimised General Pervez Musharraf's military rule by inviting him out of the blue



by Brahma  
Chellaney

to a summit in Agra. That summit went badly, but Musharraf came out the clear winner.

The Modi government initially agreed to the foreign ministers' meeting just after the Pakistani army killed an Indian soldier by sniper fire and then slit his throat and mutilated his body. In fact, such was the bad optics that India was playing a cricket match with Pakistan in Dubai on the day the Pakistani savagery was first reported.

## Meandering policy

Worse still, the timing of the Indian announcement to hold the meeting sent out an unfortunate message — that India, instead of being outraged over the mutilation, was rewarding Pakistan with bilateral discussions. That message was reinforced in the immediate aftermath by the abduction and killing of three cops in Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan-backed terrorists.

To its credit, the Modi government took barely 24 hours to correct its mistake and scrap the foreign ministers' meeting. Strong reaction on social media played a role in the quick reversal. But it is apparent that the original decision in favour of the meeting was taken without careful thought. There was no consideration of the fact that such talks would not only be futile but also amount to India playing into Pakistan's hands.

Indeed, no sooner had India reversed its decision than Imran Khan sought to mock Modi by referring to "small men holding big offices" — a statement that effectively closes the door to any senior-level bilateral talks in the coming months. That reference might more aptly apply to Khan himself. After all, Khan (the Pakistani military's newest puppet) has long been ridiculed as "Im the Dim" for his lack of intelligence.

Still, the fact is that incompetent officials in New Delhi have seriously embarrassed India through their flip-flop and

provided new grist to the Pakistani propaganda mill. For example, the ministry of external affairs cited Pakistan's glorification of terrorists through new postage stamps as one of the provocations for the Indian U-turn, although these stamps were released before Khan took office.

It is an open secret that Washington has sought to persuade New Delhi to engage with Islamabad. America has stepped up its effort to end its longest-ever war by clinching a peace deal with the Afghan Taliban, for which it needs the Pakistani military's help. India, in its first bilateral engagement with the Imran Khan government, convened a meeting of the Permanent Indus Commission in Lahore at the end of last month, although the meeting was not due until March 2019. The Commission's meeting, however, attracted little attention in India.

The Modi government's meandering Pakistan policy is also apparent from another volte-face: It hastily permitted and then, after Khan's mocking statement, postponed a tour of inspection of new Indian projects on River Chenab by Pakistan's Indus commissioner and two other officials. In September 2016, Modi had vowed that, "Blood and water cannot flow together". But two years later, instead of action, visible backsliding is evident. The Indus Waters Treaty remains the world's most generous water-sharing pact. India, however, remains reluctant to leverage this treaty to tame a scofflaw neighbour.

## No clear strategy

Successive Indian governments have failed to develop a clear strategy to deal with Pakistan. The Modi government has finally realised what was well known — that "Pakistan will not mend its ways". It's better late than never. It has also acknowledged that talks with Pakistan would be "meaningless", given "the evil agenda of Pakistan" and the "true face" of the Khan government. Can we now hope that India would develop consistency, clarity and courage in its Pakistan policy and fashion a coherent strategy to contain a rogue neighbour?

*The writer is a geostrategist and author. The views expressed are personal*

