

Dealing with Pakistan Needs a Grand Strategy

ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH

For the past few decades, India has adopted a lopsided Pakistan policy with engagement as the only means to reorient Pakistan's foreign policy. India must transition to a *realpolitik* approach backed by a range of power instruments, along with creatively leveraging the international environment. India should pursue cultural and commercial ties with liberal constituencies inside Pakistan, and remain open to dialogue with political forces that are reconsidering Pakistan's role in the region.

The February 2019 Pulwama attack against Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian government's willingness to take fight to the Pakistani heartland is a clear departure from the policy of strategic restraint. Even if the main impetus for this strategic shift was an impending national election in India, the geostrategic consequences will outlast this phase.

Stripped to its core, India's emerging approach can be described as a counter-coercive strategy, since it aims to deter Pakistan from engaging in coercion through targeted terrorism in Kashmir. The next challenge before the Indian leaders is to incorporate this approach as part of a grand strategy. What could be the principal elements of this broader strategy? What goals should India seek? What are the possibilities for reorienting domestic political incentives inside Pakistan? How do other pieces of the geopolitical puzzle in terms of Pakistan's patrons and allies fit into India's aims and interests?

A Comprehensive Approach

India's strategy has been shaped by goals that have sought to alter the situation on three interrelated levels. First, changing Pakistani behaviour so it ceases or decelerates cross-border terrorism. Second, changing Pakistan's internal structure and its imbalanced civil-military relations that perpetuate a structural confrontation with India. Third, changing how the international community, particularly the United States (us) and China, perceive India's predicament and are willing and able in their self-interests to restrain Pakistan's proxy war. And then, what are the instruments or means that have been envisaged to pursue these three goals?

Until a few years ago, it was the primacy of a diplomatic instrument that

stood out in the Indian toolkit. Dialogue with an elected civilian leadership has usually been presented as part of strengthening the process of the embryonic and fragile democracy in Pakistan that over time would rectify the domestic imbalance and weaken the security establishment's near total control over Pakistan's foreign policies. There is also a deterrent component, which includes maintaining a conventional posture backed by a credible capacity to inflict costs on Pakistan in the scenario of a Kargil-style adventurist intrusion into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), or in other theatres. Finally, there are interested third parties—the us given its long-standing alliance with Pakistan, and China with its renewed involvement in Pakistan over the past five years—who are very influential behind-the-scenes players in the India-Pakistan relationship and with whom India seeks to further its counter-terrorism goals.

It should be apparent that India's approach has essentially been a persuasion-based one to advance the twin goals of changing Pakistan's external behaviour and its domestic politics. The military instrument has so far been visualised either as a passive defence instrument—that is, fighting the incoming proxies on Indian soil—or as a broader deterrence instrument to deal with audacious conventional surprises. Yet, to be effective in this case and instil confidence to the civilian side of the Pakistani equation in its aspiration for democracy, persuasion actually requires parallel counter-coercive instruments in India's toolkit. Aside from India's restrained military defence posture to hold firm on the frontiers and the Line of Control (LoC) in J&K, there has been little so far in India's repertoire to alter the Pakistan Army's irredentist behaviour. There has been no known cost imposition strategy to reshape the incentives of Rawalpindi. The 26 February air strikes were, therefore, a first step in exploring options that impose costs before they occur (India's *casus belli* presented the move as a "pre-emptive" one) and, equally importantly, a signal to the adversary that Indian

Zorawar Daulet Singh (zorawar.dauletsingh@gmail.com) is a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and the author of *Power and Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies during the Cold War*.

restraint is no longer a taken-for-granted assumption when the Pakistani deep state is plotting plans to stir trouble in Kashmir. Put another way, by its recent actions, India has introduced an element of ambiguity and uncertainty in the Pakistan Army's calculus, which, henceforth, cannot count on strategic restraint from the other side.

At some stage after the 2019 national elections, a new Indian government would explore diplomacy with an elected regime in Islamabad. Let us assume that the Indian overture is reciprocated. Such engagement would be sustainable only if it were accompanied by a parallel strategy to blunt and weaken the Pakistani deep state and its military. This dual game, somewhat ironically, would become even more imperative if India's engagement with the civilian regime develops apace since the Pakistan Army will in all likelihood employ sub-conventional tools at its disposal to ratchet up terror strikes in India to disrupt or modulate the détente process according to its own preferences. And, this pattern will continue to repeat until the missing link in India's toolkit is addressed.

If we assume that the civil and military groups in state and society have diverging goals and visions for Pakistan (the degree of these differences is a question of legitimate debate and disagreements in the strategic community)—and India would like to provide an impetus to the civilian side via diplomacy and a predictable dialogue process—the parallel side of anticipating and blunting the lashing out by the security establishment in Pakistan cannot be ignored. For, how can we expect Pakistan's civilian leadership and civil society to place its confidence in a *modus vivendi* with India if it finds the Pakistan Army can slap it down at home on foreign policy issues and continue to bleed India at will? There have been numerous instances of this in the past: the Vajpayee–Nawaz Sharif engagement before the Kargil war, the engagement process prior to the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, and the brief Modi–Nawaz Sharif bonhomie that was dramatically cut short by the 2016 Pathankot attack on an Indian air base. Any rational Indian leadership sensitive to domestic

public opinion cannot but abandon the engagement process after a violent backlash from the Pakistani deep state.

Historically then, India has placed far too much burden on the civilian side in Pakistan to change the domestic structural dynamic, without, in any meaningful way, also sharing responsibility of changing the incentives of institutions such as the Pakistan Army which thrive on controlled confrontation with India. Most debates on India's coercive options treat it as a mutually exclusive process—a false choice between engagement and containment—rather than as a vital component of a grand strategy. If India seeks more than fleeting success, it needs to develop a policy strategy that is logical and consistent with the two mutually inclusive goals that have shaped Indian thinking for decades: the transformation of Pakistan's regional behaviour and its internal power structure.

At whatever levels it is pursued, civilian engagement must be supplemented by a strategy to impose costs and undermine the prestige of the Pakistan Army. This would involve a more robust internal security framework, including the introduction of more advanced counter-terror capabilities that seek to substantially minimise Indian military casualties in operations in J&K (since 2008, over 740 security forces personnel have lost their lives³), developing covert proxy capabilities that impose reciprocal costs on Pakistani security institutions, and a more sophisticated conventional military posture that can offer the political leadership a variety of highly limited and targeted options to degrade the flow of

terrorist networks while also presenting the Pakistan Army with a costly choice to escalate to a bigger conventional clash.

Leveraging the Global Situation

As early as 1947, South Asia had become entangled in a wider geopolitical setting. In the ensuing decades, major powers acquired enduring stakes in the strategic interactions between India and Pakistan. The subcontinent's nuclearisation has merely reinforced international interest in strategic stability and impelled external powers to strike a fine balance between the vital interests of both countries.

Getting the international situation right is important for two reasons. Pakistan's incentives to alter course would be closely linked with its expectations of international support. And, any moves by India to raise the stakes in its quest for legitimate security would only succeed if Pakistan's benefactors do not obstruct or constrain Delhi's policy. The recent crisis showed that both Washington and Beijing did not necessarily play a negative role and increased their involvement to defuse the stand-off when events appeared poised for a costly regional escalation. Tellingly, US rhetoric even endorsed the idea of India's right to defend itself in a proactive fashion from cross-border terrorist attacks.

If we step back and evaluate the India–Pakistan equation over the past five years, what stands out is that both sides proceeded from a perception that each holds an advantageous position. India's confidence emanated from Modi's 2014 victory that yielded a strong central government and expectations of stable

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ties with all the major powers. Mostly overlooked in India, Pakistani analysts and former officials too have displayed confidence that the international environment was moving in a direction that opened options for Pakistan that were unavailable in the previous decade. This included the renewed patterns of Pakistan's ties with the us and China, and the latter providing their reassurances to Pakistan and most importantly to the army on their respective strategic commitments and bilateral partnerships. In Washington's case, this appears to have been undertaken somewhat discreetly to avoid ruffling Delhi's feathers, with the result that the enduring aspects of us–Pakistan ties remain obscure, but still very real. That Pakistan has symbolically managed to also advance its public diplomacy with Moscow is seen as further proof of its geopolitical relevance. Much of Pakistan's leverage can of course be traced to the ongoing phase of the Afghan conflict. It fended off the most dangerous phase when us policy might have shifted in an adversarial direction, or instability in the tribal frontier areas might have completely exploded. Thus, the Pakistan Army probably perceives itself in a position of reasonable strength where Washington, Beijing, and Moscow have recognised Pakistan's role in a future settlement on the conflict in Afghanistan.

So, both India and Pakistan perceive themselves to be in a comfortable strategic position. At any rate, the evolving roles and interests of third parties are becoming significant again, and how Delhi leverages the international environment will determine the success of its grand strategy.

Both Washington and Beijing have overlapping interests in regional stability and avoidance of a major subcontinental conflict. While each maintains deep ties with Pakistan for different reasons, it is unclear to what extent their longer-term interests coincide with India, which seeks a structural transformation in Pakistan's domestic politics and external behaviour. The us and China appear content with, or probably prefer, a Pakistan with a strong Rawalpindi, along with competent civilian governance

structures and an elite with a wider world view. A Pakistan that looks beyond South Asia could be a useful potential partner in burden sharing, ironically for both the us and China. For Washington, the Pakistan Army is an insurance card for persisting security challenges such as regime survival for us client states in West Asia as well as for the containment of Iran. For China, a stable Pakistan can be a partner in the Belt and Road connectivity projects and future continental industrial and energy corridors. As Andrew Small (2015: 200) underlines, Beijing's large economic investments “come with some clear expectations about the choices that Pakistan's political and military leadership make about their country's future.” Pakistan “will not have the free hand that it used to enjoy.”

In sum, both the us and China seek a strong, stable, and secure Pakistan that controls its destabilising behaviour because that undermines their wider regional interests. For the us, a revisionist Pakistan pulls India inward and away from potential cooperation on Asian geopolitics. For China, it undermines its industrial and connectivity projects in Pakistan, while negatively impacting India–China ties. Hence, evolving interests of the great powers in South Asia might not necessarily portend an adverse geopolitical setting for India in the medium term. This is even more plausible if the widening comprehensive national power gap between India and Pakistan make the latter's traditional role as a balancer or spoiler unattractive in the eyes of the great powers. As Pakistani scholar Hussain Haqqani predicts, “You can try to leverage your strategic location as much as you like, but there will come a time ... when strategic concerns change” (Lammon 2019).

So, while it is reasonable to forecast that both the us and China benefit from a more normalised Pakistan, Indian policymakers should also remain clear-eyed that neither country would be willing to expend much strategic capital in an ambitious policy to reorder the domestic scene or civil–military relations in Pakistan. Not yet, at least. In any case, Indian agency is essential to reorient

perceptions of the great powers. Maintaining that India has the right and the capacity to adopt an active defence posture—that is, blocking the flow of cross-border terror by proactive operations on the LoC along with reserving the option for more ambitious punitive strikes in response to major terrorist attacks on Indian military targets—would play an important part in shaping how third parties view Indian interests and thereby assume constructive roles in managing Pakistani behaviour.

In Conclusion

India's future Pakistan policy must strive to cultivate deterrence and change the calculus of the Pakistani security elite in their use of proxy terror as an instrument of statecraft. To this end, India's posture must remain unswerving even as the tactics remain flexible. India should also creatively leverage its growing bilateral stakes with the us and China to adapt their Pakistan policies, and together contemplate a vision of Pakistan that is in consonance with their main geopolitical interests and concerns. Finally, India must take the longue durée and remain sensitive to the prospect of change inside Pakistan—however modest and incremental—to develop societal, cultural and commercial ties with liberal constituencies, and engage in dialogue with political forces that are reconsidering Pakistan's role in the region. A sophisticated grand strategy backed by a range of power instruments and nimble enough to adapt to changing circumstances would not only enable India to reduce cross-border terror, it could open unforeseen windows to a more stable subcontinent. The surrounding politics of the recent crisis must not distract Indian strategists from moving the needle in new directions.

NOTE

- 1 South Asia Terrorism Portal, <https://www.satp.org/>.

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