

# India-Pakistan Relations: A Brief Survey of the Evolving Conflict Terrain

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KAMALDEEP SINGH SANDHU, MAR 21 2016

Since achieving independence in 1947, the relations between India and Pakistan have been such that the talks of trade, cooperation and peace have often taken place parallel to the threats of war. They have fought four wars and on more than one occasion mobilised their militaries with a credible threat of war. Since the early 1990s, the insurgency in Kashmir and terrorist incidents in other parts of India have affected bilateral relations in a profound way. Serious terrorist attacks in India causing huge loss of life, such as the Mumbai bombings in 2005 and Mumbai attacks in 2008, have often led to the loss of public support for dialogue with Pakistan. Groups targeting the peace process between India and Pakistan have exploited this reality to the extent of setting up a trend. For the past few years almost every Indo-Pakistan peace initiative has been followed by a terrorist attack.

Consequently, the India-Pakistan debates have been led by belligerent minds, regularly perpetuating the negative narratives that have demonised the enemy and created virtuous self-images. The conflict environment ridden with regular violent incidents has further fuelled such negative narratives, creating a self-sustaining vicious cycle of mistrust, bellicosity and conflict. As a result, a positive cycle of mutual trust, confidence building, peace and stability between the two states, could never gain any foothold.

This article analyses the pattern in which the conflict is evolving since the beginning of this century. It highlights two important factors: the limited military options available to India after the appearance of nuclear weapons and the internal turmoil in Pakistan, which have played an important role in shaping the conflict environment in South Asia. It primarily argues that belligerent attitudes and actions of the past century may not be applicable anymore. Indians and Pakistanis have developed very stereotypical attitudes towards each other, which are rigid and cannot change in a short period. However, as this article makes the case, that given the way the conflict environment is evolving, both Indians and Pakistanis may be forced to rethink their attitudes and change the narratives that perpetuate bitterness and enmity towards each other.

### India: Treading the Conflict Terrain – Not a Stroll Anymore

They say that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. However, when the going gets dangerous, the tough should 'rethink his options'. After all, there is a very thin line between being 'brave' and being 'foolish'. There was a time when the Indian Army could march a few kilometres inside Pakistani territory and threaten cities such as Lahore and Sialkot; or the Indian Navy could lay a blockade around Pakistan's only port city Karachi and totally cut off naval and commercial traffic. This doesn't seem to be the case anymore. The times have certainly changed and both sides have a subtle realisation of this fact.

Nuclear weapons and multiple delivery systems have shaped the environment in such a way that any armed conflict now possesses an inherent risk of escalation to a nuclear exchange. Furthermore, the stability in deterrence is questionable because the nuclear thresholds are undefined and a vast difference of perception exists on both sides.

India believes that space exists for a limited conflict where, if the need arises, doctrines such as 'Cold Start' can be executed, drawing the Pakistani army into battle and destroying its war fighting capability. India's stand rests on the

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premise that while nuclear rhetoric is a good way to build and sway public opinions, empirically speaking the truth and action have generally sided with rationality and pragmatism. Sir Lawrence Freedman (2003) in his book *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* rightly states that due to the destructive power of (even low yield) nuclear weapons, 'when it comes to actual nuclear war planning, all hawks suddenly become doves'.

Pakistan, on the other hand (and despite the above), has adopted a nuclear posture based on Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs), short-range missiles and a highly advertised 'first-use' policy, keeping the red lines vague. Scholars claim that the main aim of this posture is to draw immediate international attention and mediation in case of a crisis and prevent it from escalation to any kind of armed conflict.

While this debate carries on, it seems that the 'existential deterrence' has played its role by having a deep impact on the belligerent attitudes, especially of the Indian policy making circles. This is evident from the responses – both actual and rhetorical – to the five major terrorist incidents that occurred during the past fifteen years, as discussed below.

## 2001-02

When five terrorists belonging to Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed attacked the Indian Parliament building on 13 December 2001, the Home Minister of India LK Advani clearly pointed a finger at the 'neighbouring country and the terrorist organisation active there'. By the time the Kaluchak attacks happened on 14 May 2002, in which 31 soldiers and their families were killed by terrorists belonging to Lashkar-e-Toiba, the Indian army had already been mobilised and the army units were sitting in battle formations awaiting final orders to go to war. A week later while addressing the soldiers posted in Kashmir, Prime Minister AB Vajpayee asked them to 'be prepared for a decisive battle'. The situations de-escalated after Pakistan, under pressure from the United States, made gestures of reigning in the militant groups and their leaders.

## 2008

After the Mumbai attacks on 26 November 2008, India's then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee stated that India may indulge in military strikes against the training camps of terrorist outfits in Pakistan. India did not mobilise its troops. Pakistan moved its troops towards the border, albeit only briefly, which were withdrawn after few days of talks. In a recent talk at King's College London, Siddharth Varadarajan, a senior Indian journalist, mentioned that immediately after the Mumbai attacks, the Indian government did seek options from the military, only to be told that there were none.

## 2015

On 27 July 2015 three terrorists attacked a bus and a police station in Gurdaspur district of Punjab, killing seven people. The only information that the investigating agencies could gather was that the terrorists were 'Muslim' and they seemed to have come from Pakistan, extracting data from the GPS recovered from them, which did not show any waypoints beyond the border. The case, besides lacking sufficient evidence to hold any particular organisation or state responsible, received an unusual media lacklustre in India.

## 2016

Most recently on 02 January 2016, terrorists attacked the Air Force Station in Pathankot with an aim of targeting India's 'high-value assets', such as helicopters and aircrafts parked in the station. An operation that lasted nearly three days resulted in all six terrorists dead along with seven security personnel and a civilian. The Indian intelligence agencies linked the terrorists to Jaish-e-Mohammed, based on the evidence tracked from the phone calls and GPS. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, blamed the 'enemies of humanity, who could not digest India's progress'. Home Minister Rajnath Singh did say that 'if there is any terror attack on India, we will give a befitting reply', albeit only after saying that 'Pakistan is our neighbouring country. We want good relations not only with Pakistan but with all our neighbours'. Almost all debates on the news channels and editorials of newspapers in India

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pursued the theme that the terrorist attacks should not derail the peace process between the two countries.

These five major terrorist attacks in India (that had originated in Pakistan) show us the changing conflict terrain in nuclearized South Asia during the last two decades. India's response changed from mobilising the army and keeping it in battle ready formations, which also had an inherent risk of 'accidental' start of a war in 2002-03, to a simple rhetoric of blaming the 'enemies of humanity' in 2016.

This implies that the space for an armed conflict in South Asia has definitely reduced. This has forced the leaders, especially Indian, to take less belligerent stances as they are incapable of fulfilling their promises of 'befitting replies' due to limited military options. This, in turn, has paved the way for diplomatic dialogues, both official and unofficial, as a breakdown of diplomacy leaves no option other than military action.

On the other side of the border in Pakistan, terrorism and sectarian violence that has killed more than 50,000 people and cost the economy about \$78 billion since 2001, has forced its leaders to look inwards, taking away their focus from the traditional 'Indian threat'.

## Pakistan: The Internal Turmoil – Blaming India Does Not Help Anymore

Since Independence, the Pakistani state has used a number of issues – unequal distribution of resources during partition, accession of Kashmir, division of water, loss of East Pakistan, unrest in Baluchistan – to develop a narrative of an 'existential threat' posed by India.

However, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Pakistan's participation in the global war on terror changed the security situation drastically. Militant groups, some of them nurtured and supported by the Pakistani state for its own goals, became self-sustaining in terms of funding and recruitment. Over a period, the groups splintered and some of them turned against the state. During the last two years or so, the Islamic State or *Daesh* has made its presence felt in the Af-Pak region attracting many fighters from the older groups.

Even the groups dormant within Pakistan such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Toyiba, which were sometimes referred to as good terrorists, have started showing signs of rebellion. For instance, Masood Azhar, the Jaish-e-Mohammad founder sought by India for the Pathankot and other attacks, has threatened retaliation if Pakistan shuts down terrorist groups operating against India. The civilian and military leadership in Pakistan fully comprehends that the *Salafist* ideology pursued by these groups is a threat to the 'idea of Pakistan'. The capture of Swat Valley by Taliban in 2007 and 2009; the Lal Masjid operation in 2007; the Peshawar School massacre in December 2014; the Safoora Goth bus attack in 2015; and the Bacha Khan University attack in January 2016 are stark reminders of this fact.

Consequently, the change in narrative seems inevitable and is slowly becoming visible. For the first time in Pakistan's history, the threat from an internal enemy is dominating the so-called external threat from India. Prominent voices in the media, even those who have been traditionally anti-India, have acknowledged that 'it was time for tough questions instead of blaming India'.

The task of improving relations with India, however, is not easy and there is still a lot of ground to cover. The state power in Pakistan is shared by the civil government, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the military under the army chief Raheel Sharif. Traditionally, Pakistan's military has dominated the security and foreign policy, which has been predominantly anti-India. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, on the other hand, has been known for his friendly inclinations towards India.

Pakistan's government approved its 'National Internal Security Policy 2014-2018' (NISP) to deal with the growing menace of terrorism and extremism, in 2014. Its operationalization is still pending. However, it reflects the mind-set of the civil government and the narratives that it wishes to pursue, quite clearly. It was summarised in media as follows:

'...perhaps the most important aspect of NISP is that it offers the first integrated sweep of the challenges and

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solutions from a civilian perspective. This is a radical departure from the frustratingly oversimplified military-defined threats facing 'Islamic Pakistan' from obscure or imagined sources based outside Pakistan rather than the internal threats that the NISP focuses on. [...] NISP is not just a first by being a clear civilian perspective on a turf traditionally dominated by the security establishment but also bold in its diagnosis in policy articulation. [...] it is a big step forward in weaning control of the narrative that defines the purpose of the state as being in service of its subjects rather than vice versa.'

Soon after the adoption of NISP, Nawaz Sharif's authority was weakened by the military sponsored protests led by Imran Khan and Tahir-ul-Qadri in August 2014. In this light, the Army's resistance to having peaceful relations with India is a huge hindrance for Nawaz Sharif.

Nawaz Sharif has a long history of conflict with the State's army – After having served as the Chief Minister of Punjab he became Prime Minister for two short tenures in the 1990s, only to be ousted from power in a military coup, jailed and then exiled for nearly seven years, finally making a comeback 2013. The army chief's announcement to retire in November 2016 probably comes at the right time for Nawaz Sharif. It gives him an opportunity to select the person who is in accord with his own aspirations. In his walk across the military's tight rope, other institutions such as the judiciary, civil society and the entrepreneurial élite, are likely to take his side in times when the Army does not seem to be able to provide the security inside the country.

While Pakistan military's anti-India rhetoric seems uncompromising, there are minor indicators signalling change in its mind-set. It is claimed that the closest that India and Pakistan got to resolving the Kashmir dispute was during Musharraf's last years in power, just before he was ousted. Both India and Pakistan had made huge progress on the four-point formula that Musharraf had suggested, a strategy likely in line with the Army through which Musharraf himself rose. Speaking in 2013, Lt Gen (r) Talat Masood of the Pakistan Army stated that the military understands very well that 'a continued stand-off with India only hurts us economically and also leads to a loss of our leverage with both India and the West'.

## Conclusion

Both Indians and Pakistanis belong to a rigid culture where, more often than not, self-realisation has worked better than coercion. It is pertinent for India to realise that the use of force, which also comes with an inherent risk of self-destruction, will not coerce any self-respecting neighbour to change its course, even for its own good. The change is evident in India's evolving responses discussed above as well as in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's regular engagements with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Similarly, in Pakistan, realisation of the fact that a continuous belligerent stance with India and the consequent policies it pursues, is causing more damage to Pakistani social, political and economic fabric seems to be dawning upon the Pakistani public and its elites.

Imagine a conflict environment spectrum ranging from low belligerency to high. Let us say that the belligerents live in a certain comfort zone where the collateral damage is not too high and acceptable; hence, they refuse to shift their positions (bellicose narratives and mind-sets). However, over a period, the conflict environment reconfigures itself, pushing the belligerents to that part of the spectrum where collateral damage becomes too high and unacceptable. This forces them to either change their attitudes or suffer destruction. A process strikingly similar to this is underway in South Asia.

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## About the author:

**Kamaldeep Singh Sandhu** is a former officer of the Indian Army. He served with the Parachute Regiment for 10 years in various, staff, command and instructional appointments. After retiring, he graduated with an MA in 'War in the Modern World' from King's College London in 2014. Kamaldeep is now starting his PhD this year.

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