

India and Pakistan: Modi Persists with Hardline on Terror

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Summary

In the weeks leading up to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan from 13-14 June 2019, many had hoped there would be a “pull-aside” meeting between Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to resuscitate dialogues for peace. This meeting did not happen, however—only a handshake and exchange of pleasantries—suggesting that for now, India will push forward on its policy of using multilateral forums to isolate Pakistan for state-sponsored terror.

Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Bishkek resolved that terror and talks cannot go together. This was the stance he reiterated to Chinese President Xi Jinping, in the first of a series of bilateral meetings during the summit with leaders from Afghanistan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia—but notably, not Pakistan.

Modi’s refusal to speak with Imran Khan shows New Delhi is not yet convinced of the sincerity of Pakistan’s efforts to reign in terrorism on Pakistani soil, which, historically, have been tactical and short-lived. Rather than using the summit to speak with Khan to resolve differences, Modi used the opportunity to deliver a veiled critique of Pakistan-based terrorism, demanding that “countries sponsoring, aiding, and funding terrorism” be held accountable and that countries “come out of their narrow purview” to make them so.

Modi’s hard line against Pakistan, separately reflected in his call to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) leaders to organize a global conference on terrorism and recollection of his visit to St. Anthony’s Church in Sri Lanka, is in keeping with his uncompromising campaign rhetoric, where he made national security and a zero-tolerance policy against terrorism a central plank of his platform following a suicide attack in Pulwama that killed 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) security personnel.

On 26 February 2019, Modi sent fighter jets to bomb a terrorist training camp in Balakot, Pakistan, effectively drawing a red line in the sand: that any future terrorist attack from across the border would be met with forceful retaliation.

Peace Talks: On Again, Off Again

Imran Khan’s words since then have been conciliatory, either suggesting that Modi’s tough love on Pakistan is yielding results, or that Pakistan’s internal weaknesses, due to crippling foreign debt; reliance on foreign actors like China and the International Monetary Fund to retain financial solvency; and search for international credibility amidst mounting exasperation for Pakistani terrorism, seem to leave Islamabad with little choice but to pursue peace and avoid antagonizing its belligerent neighbour.

Khan made repeated overtures to Modi after his election win to revive peace talks: first in a congratulatory tweet, and later in a phone call and letter, stressing the need to jointly fight “poverty and underdevelopment.”

Again, ahead of the SCO meeting, in an interview with the Russian news agency Sputnik, Khan messaged that the conference would be “an opportunity to speak with the Indian leadership,” and expressed hope that Modi would use the “big mandate” of his victory to “develop better relationships and bring peace in the subcontinent,” once again pushing the ostensibly worthwhile goal of “lifting their people out of poverty.”

The Problem is Terrorism

Three factors may be at work behind Modi’s reluctance to take Khan’s peace gestures on face value. First, Delhi is not convinced he has the power to deliver on any promises to end cross-border terror. That quite clearly is the domain of the all-powerful Pakistan army. Second, a series of political and economic crises at home seem to be chipping away Khan’s standing at home. Third, Delhi might believe a premature peace bid would weaken the current mobilisation of international pressure on Pakistan to stop its support for terror.

India and Pakistan have tried multiple times to make peace since the early 1990s. But these efforts were scuttled by repeated terrorist attacks against India. Delhi believes terror is the mechanism by which Pakistan “punches up” while also forcing India to the bargaining table, capitalizing on fear by the international community that conflict escalation will lead to nuclear war. If Pakistan might see coercion as critical in compelling India to negotiate on Kashmir, Delhi is unwilling to do that with a gun pointed to its head.

A Brave New World

Meanwhile, the Balakot attack signaled India’s determination to break out of the nuclear corner that it was locked into by Pakistan’s threat of nuclear escalation. Modi’s political position at home has considerably improved, thanks to a renewed and massive political mandate in the 2019 general elections. Equally important is the fact that the major powers are today more empathetic with the Indian concerns and arguments. Until now China seemed to be an exception. But Beijing has recently lifted its technical hold against the chief of Pakistan’s Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist group, Masood Azhar, being held responsible for the terrorist attack in Pulwama. This suggests Beijing, for now, is more concerned about regional stability and not driving India toward the US than supporting its “all weather friend”, Pakistan. Outside the summit, before an upcoming tour through the Indo-Pacific, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo touted the Trump Administration’s tough stance against Pakistan’s “unacceptable” support for terrorism. Finally, the Financial Action Task Force is weighing whether to demote Pakistan to the “blacklist” for failure to take sufficient action to stop terrorist financing, which would cut off foreign investment. India will speak with Pakistan when terrorism stops. If Pakistan does not change, maybe the world just might.

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