

What is it that Pakistan wants anyway?

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India could have dealt with Kashmir differently. But Imran Khan must realise that Jaish-e-Mohammed and others of its ilk are not the answer.

The release of captured Indian fighter pilot Abhinandan Varthaman on March 1 is excellent news: Pakistan's gesture that it wants to de-escalate a crisis that put the world on edge. Equally, this act conveys confidence that Pakistan has had the upper hand in a conflict not of its own choosing. Pakistani war rhetoric, though disturbingly loud, was less shrill than that within India. Prime Minister Imran Khan, to his credit, showed statesmanship by inviting dialogue instead of replaying his container days. Inter Services Public Relations releases too were measured, not inflammatory.

These are good omens but surely it is time to think beyond the next few days which, hopefully, will see a gradual winding down. But, assuming this happens, shall we simply return to the situation before the Pulwama tragedy? Or will another suicide attack claimed by some Pakistan based militant group create a still bigger crisis? This is no time for hubris.

International opinion

Fact: During the current crisis Pakistan received little support internationally. Turkey and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation have condemned the Indian incursion into sovereign Pakistani territory. Still, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation ignored Pakistan's objections and invited Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj as its guest of honour at the 46th session of its Council of Foreign Ministers in Abu Dhabi, on March 1-2. Elsewhere the silence has been deafening.

China - the all-weather friend on which Pakistan pins its hopes - has remained studiously cautious, issuing little more than homilies urging peace. One should not expect otherwise. China competes strategically with the United States and India, but it also trades heavily with both. There is no war talk and no visceral animosity among members of the China-US-India triad. Whether China will once again oppose a United Nations Security Council resolution to declare the Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar a terrorist is worth watching out for. [Editor's note: This article was written before March 13 when China blocked the United Nations Security Council's move to designate Pakistan-based Azhar a global terrorist.]

Saudi Arabia, whose munificence Pakistan counts upon, has refrained from substantive comment. Although two weeks ago Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman received the most extravagant welcome in Islamabad accorded to any foreign ruler in recent history, the desert kingdom chose silence. We need but recall that the crown prince's next stop had been Delhi. Also, that in 2017 Saudi Arabia's highest civilian award was conferred by King Salman upon Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Although pellet guns were then being freely used to blind Kashmiri protesters, the Saudi king did not raise the issue.

The United States, still the most important country in the world, has indeed taken sides - India's. All semblance of trust between the US and Pakistan evaporated after the 2011 discovery of Osama bin

Laden in Abbottabad. In 2018, the US cut off security aid to Pakistan, accusing it of siding with the Taliban. A statement some days ago by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo characterised India's incursion as a "counter terrorism action". Many in Pakistan, including in the Army, see the United States as waiting to pounce upon and seize Pakistan's nuclear weapons at the first opportunity.

As for neighbours, Iran and Afghanistan: that they choose India over Pakistan goes without saying. Both have repeatedly accused Pakistan of harbouring terrorists. An Iranian general explicitly blamed Pakistan after a suicide bomb attacker, using a suicide tactic similar to that in Pulwama, killed 27 Revolutionary Guards two weeks ago.

Such adverse international opinion is not good for Pakistan's economic health, given its dependence upon the global system. Wars are expensive business, as is maintaining a huge military establishment on alert. To give an idea of the costs involved, consider that putting a single middle-level fighter aircraft into the air costs a minimum of \$25,000 per hour!

To deal with an economic crisis, in the months since his election, Prime Minister Khan has visited country after country seeking loans and aid. Even if the level of hostilities with India does not rise beyond the current level, it is unclear where the money for maintaining a constant high level of defence preparedness will come from.

Presently Pakistan has applied for a bailout from the International Monetary Fund. It also seeks removal from the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force's grey list upon which it was placed in June. The Financial Action Task Force monitors money laundering and terror group financing, and has given Pakistan until May to carry out recommended measures to achieve de-listing. Black-listing, which is a possible further step, could cripple Pakistan economically by isolating it from the global banking system.

Financial cost to Pakistan

Is financial ruination of Pakistan worth the price? And what is it that we want anyway? Jaish-e-Mohammed and others of its ilk are never going to succeed in liberating Kashmir. All that terror attacks do is spill more blood and exacerbate state repression.

Nevertheless, the Jaish's ranks have swelled in recent years. For this it thanks Modi. Frustrated at the absence of meaningful dialogue with Delhi, the blinding of hundreds of demonstrators, and intrusive house searches, large numbers of Kashmiris have been radicalised. Consequently the Jaish today has competition from still more radical organisations such as Daesh (the Islamic State).

India could have dealt with Kashmir differently. By formally acknowledging Kashmir as a problem that needs a political solution, using humane methods of crowd control, releasing political prisoners from Kashmiri jails, and assuring the safety and security of Kashmiris residing in Indian cities, it could have moved sensibly towards a lessening of internal tensions. It did not, for which it has none but itself to blame.

That said, religious radicalisation poses a threat to both countries. Days ago Prime Minister Khan said India should ask itself why 21-year-old Adil Ahmad Dar, who is not known to have ever visited Pakistan, chose to become a human bomb. This question actually leads nowhere. Hundreds of Pakistani soldiers – far more than Indian soldiers – have died after being hit by suicide bombers hoping for easy entrance into heaven. To eliminate them was a major objective of Pak Army's Rad-ul-Fasad operation.

It is now incumbent upon Pakistan's security managers to cease discriminating between those who attack Pakistan's people and Army, and those who attack targets in Kashmir. During the present

crisis they have demonstrated maturity. They must take the next step now. In that lies the future of a peaceful Pakistan and a peaceful South Asia.

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