

Dealing with Pakistan: Implications for India's Pakistan policy after Pathankot

The recent terrorist attack on the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot has sparked a new round of commentaries on how New Delhi should deal with the country's internal security situation and with neighbouring Pakistan, given the suspicion that terrorists from that country had carried out this attack. The planned India-Pakistan talks are on hold, even as the Modi Government is under domestic pressure to shore up security at home.

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The Indian airbase in Pathankot, Punjab, was attacked in a pre-dawn attack by heavily-armed terrorists on 2 January 2016. Despite seemingly having had prior intelligence about the imminent attack, it took Indian security forces about 80 hours to completely thwart the attack. This was a particularly daring attack, especially since the Pathankot airbase is home to strategic MIG 21 military aircraft as well as military attack helicopters. The attack came about a week after India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise visit to Lahore on his way home from an official visit to Afghanistan. Since the Pathankot attacks, there has been a significant amount of commentary about

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how the Indian state will and should proceed in dealing with Pakistan. Three major issues need to be addressed in relation to the attacks. The first is understanding the possible factors contributing to Mr Modi's decision to visit Lahore. The second is examining who the terrorists were and the motivations that drove them. The third is interrogating the possible options available to India in dealing with Pakistan in the aftermath of the Pathankot attack.

Mr Modi's visit to Lahore, on his way back from Kabul, surprised most Indian watchers. There are three possible reasons that drove his decision to stop-over in Lahore. After the breakdown in India-Pakistan talks in August 2015, there was a breakthrough in November 2015 when the prime ministers of the two countries had an impromptu meeting in Paris on the side-lines of the global climate change conference. This was followed by a meeting of the National Security Advisors of the two countries in early December in Bangkok, with a commitment to further dialogue. India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's trip to Islamabad to attend a conference on the future of Afghanistan was meant to continue this momentum for greater dialogue between the two countries. Mr Modi's surprise visit to Lahore was thus meant to build on this approach.

Secondly, and related to the first point, this approach was meant to assuage international pressure (largely from the United States) for the two countries to arrest the deterioration in their bilateral relationship. More specifically, India needed to counter the prevalent image of Pakistan being keen to engage in bilateral dialogue and India constantly imposing preconditions for the bilateral dialogue process.

Thirdly, Mr Modi's thinly-veiled references to Pakistan in his address in Kabul, with reference both to sanctuaries of terrorism and to the attempts to exclude India from playing a role in Afghanistan, were largely viewed as India's robust attempt to reclaim India's strategic clout in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani's seeming disappointment with Pakistan, after attempting to improve relations with the latter since he came to power, led to attempts to recover close ties between Kabul and New Delhi by the second half of 2015. Taken together, there was probably a recognition that Indian diplomacy needed to assuage sections of opinion both internationally and also in Pakistan about Indian intentions in the region, and a stop-over in Lahore was a useful public relations device to signal Indian desire for cordial relations with Pakistan.

The attack on Pathankot must be understood in the context of an earlier identical attack in July on a police station in Gurdaspur in Punjab. A large number of commentators have attributed both attacks to the Pakistani military and/or sections of it (namely Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence). Several analysts see these two attacks as a new trend in cross-border attacks within India. They discern a movement away from the targeting of major Indian cities (like the Mumbai attacks and the earlier attacks on the Indian Parliament in Delhi) to targeting Tier 2 and 3 cities and towns.

The reasons for this shift could be two-fold. The first could be the increasing levels of difficulty in carrying out attacks in major Indian cities like Mumbai or Delhi because of the significant upgrading of the internal security infrastructure after the Mumbai attacks. Tier 2 and 3 Indian cities and towns thus become easier targets according to this logic. The second reason could be the Pakistani military testing India's 'red lines' when it comes to a drastic Indian military response. According to some of these analysts, there might be fears within the Pakistani military that another attack on a major Indian city like Mumbai or Delhi with large casualties might trigger these Indian 'red lines' as well as lead international opinion to bring drastic pressure on Pakistan, with adverse consequences for Pakistan.

One other possible reason for these two attacks in Punjab within a short span of time is the relatively porous nature of the international border between the two Punjabs in comparison to the line dividing India and Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir. The latter was the route which infiltrators from Pakistan had used traditionally, but there is a belief that India has significantly checked this infiltration especially since the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in May 2014. Punjab's international border is also porous because of the drug smuggling routes routinely used by smugglers on both sides, and there are claims that the Pathankot attackers used these smuggling routes to infiltrate into Indian Punjab from Pakistan.

There has been a significant amount of commentary since the Pathankot attacks about whether India should continue to engage in a bilateral dialogue with Pakistan. One line of argument posits that India should continue to engage the Pakistani civilian leadership because calling off dialogue

would reward ‘hardliners’ within Pakistan and/or the Pakistani military who were complicit in attacks on India and who are against peaceful relations between the two countries. The other major strand of opinion counsels against a resumption of dialogue with Pakistan because it seemingly has failed to prevent attacks on Indian soil by terrorists from Pakistan. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, India’s first response was not to accuse Pakistan as being directly complicit in the attacks, which gave the Pakistani civilian government some political room for manoeuvre domestically. It used this political room to arrest the head of Jaish e-Mohammad, Maulana Masood Azhar (along with several of his associates), the group India has identified as being responsible for the attacks. India has reciprocated by allowing the decision to defer the foreign secretary talks scheduled for 15 January to be represented as a joint decision by both sides rather than India’s unilateral response to Pakistan not having done enough to assuage India’s demands – bringing those responsible for the attacks based in Pakistan to justice swiftly. For now, the Indian government has postponed the decision on whether the dialogue process should continue with Pakistan. It is difficult to conceive Pakistan being able to deliver on India’s main demand - namely arrest and imprison, via a speedy trial, those India believes are responsible for planning and executing the attacks. Even though the Modi Government enjoys reasonably broad support across the political classes domestically (with the expected exception of the Congress party) for better relations with Pakistan, any compromise on this demand will be difficult to pitch domestically. Given these two sets of observations, in the near-term, the India-Pakistan dialogue process will remain in limbo.

In the medium- to longer-term though, India has limited options to respond to this attack vis-a-vis Pakistan. There is no viable military option available to India as far as targeting terrorists and terrorist camps in Pakistan is concerned. There is also a realisation that any guarantees offered by Pakistan’s civilian leaders, no matter how genuine, count for very little as it is Pakistan’s military which dictates Pakistan’s foreign relations especially with regard to India. However, given India’s limited options, ‘talking about talks’ could be the only realistic long-term strategy available to India with regard to Pakistan. It keeps channels of communications open so that the two countries do not accidentally descend into an all-out nuclear stand-off. It also keeps international (mainly US) pressure off India when it comes to concerns about the deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan.

One main response to this attack will in fact be internal rather than external. There is a huge debate within India presently about how it deals with attacks of this nature and the manner in which different sections of the country's intelligence, security and defence services should be working together to deal with this threat. This debate is not new. It took place after the Kargil War, the attack on India's Parliament and after the attacks in Mumbai. This attack will lead to even more introspection and build on earlier initiatives to strengthen India's internal security infrastructure so it can deal better with the next attack. One feature of this attack, together with the earlier attack in Gurdaspur, is the porous nature of the border in Punjab and the manner in which terrorists have used existing criminal- and drug-smuggling routes to their advantage. This will be one key area the government will concentrate on, and it will aim to disrupt, with the help of their ally, the Akali Government in Punjab, drug- and other criminal-smuggling routes along the Punjab border.

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