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Back to the Basics in Indo-Pak Puzzle

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Abstract

The issue of inviolability of the India-Pakistan Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir is once again in prime focus – this time, in the context of the latest meeting between the Prime Ministers of these two South Asian neighbours. While not being entirely clouded by the Indian media discourse on a ‘Second Kargil’, the new India-Pakistan move for peace and tranquillity along the LOC requires much sunshine diplomacy from both the civil and military officials of the two sides.

Much ‘Ado’ about ‘Second Kargil’

Sino-Indian relationship and Indo-Pakistan engagement has often come under intense pressure from the foreign-policy ‘hawks’ of various hues in India. Significant in this context is the latest Indian domestic discourse on the so-called ‘Second Kargil’ – a new wave of clandestine ‘Pakistani infiltration’ into India across the Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Pakistani authorities have by and large stayed away from the politics of this controversy. Interestingly, however, this discourse has been strongly discounted by some ‘informed’ authorities in India itself, on the basis that the latest non-intensive wave of ‘Pakistani infiltration’ could not be accurately described as ‘Second Kargil’.

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Among Indians, ‘Kargil’ is the political shorthand for Pakistani ‘aggression’ or clandestine ‘infiltration’ into India across the LOC in 1999. This led to a conflict that ended only when the Indian Army regained total control over the territory where the infiltrators had entrenched themselves. On the diplomatic front, the then President of the United States (US) Bill Clinton intervened to exert pressure on Pakistan to respect the sanctity of the LOC.

The sanctity of the LOC is in sharp focus this time, too, involving just India and Pakistan as the sole stakeholders – and not the US as well. The Indian Army is widely believed to have rolled back the so-called ‘Second Kargil’ ‘infiltration’ by 9 October 2013. However, the ‘second Kargil’ has cast a faint shadow over, but not shattered, the importance of the meeting that India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif held in New York on 29 September 2013.

Identifying the principal “takeaway” of that Singh-Sharif meeting, the Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesman, speaking in Islamabad on 3 October, said that “*the two Prime Ministers agreed to stabilize the situation on the Line of Control*”.² (Emphasis is added by the author.)

Mechanism for LOC ‘Stability’

In view of this agreement, the so-called ‘Second Kargil’ is of disconcerting relevance to the outcome of the latest Singh-Sharif meeting. Moreover, it is because of this very aspect that some key stakeholders in India have categorically denounced the talk of ‘Second Kargil’ as media hype. Chief Minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, told journalists in Srinagar on 9 October that the Indian Army, the civil authorities and indeed the Indian Government had “not spoken of any ‘Second Kargil’”. He emphasised, however, that the Pakistani “infiltrations” into India “occur incessantly” as also the “ceasefire violations” by Pakistan. Dr Singh and Mr Sharif had now agreed to “reintroduce”, or rather resurrect, the mechanism of talks between each other’s Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) to address the issue of violations of the sanctity of the LOC, Mr Abdullah pointed out.³

As for the “hype” over the so-called ‘second Kargil’, he said Pakistani “infiltrators” were now being sent into India in bigger batches of 30-40 persons each instead of five or six in a batch as before. So, the entry of at least five or six out of a batch of 30-40 would be deemed by their masters as “a success” in the current context of a heightened alert on the Indian side, Mr Abdullah explained.⁴

² The quotation is from “a rush transcript” of the Pakistani press briefing on 3 October 2013; and this “may be updated”, the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said. <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?prID=1488> (accessed on 7 October 2013)

³ These significant comments, in Urdu, by Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah are taken from a video-recording of his media interaction in Srinagar on 9 October. This video on the website of ‘Greater Kashmir’ newspaper in Srinagar (<http://www.greaterkashmir.com>) was accessed on 11 October 2013. The translation from Urdu is by the author.

⁴ Ibid

In an op-ed piece, Syed Ata Hasnain, a former Corps Commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps of the Indian Army and an architect of its ‘hearts-and-minds approach’ in Jammu and Kashmir, has also sought to debunk the hype over the so-called ‘Second Kargil’. In his view, “there is no need to go hyper”. His assessment: “This was never Kargil II. Kargil had strategic importance because of the Leh-Srinagar Highway and the link with Siachen. The Keran/Shalabatu episode [of infiltration, dubbed as ‘Second Kargil’] was [just] a clever ploy to push the maximum number of terrorists into the [Kashmir] Valley [on the Indian side]. This is not the first time that Shalabatu has been used for infiltration or concentration”.⁵ The references to various strategic locations should be seen in the context of their salience to either the Kargil conflict of 1999 or the current “hype” over ‘Second Kargil’, as the case might be.

A not-so-subtle message in this sub-plot – the media hype over ‘Second Kargil’ – is that the latest and apparent bonhomie between Dr Singh and Mr Sharif could now be undermined by Pakistan’s Army and military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – in a repeat of recent history. The “hype” over ‘Second Kargil’ is a reminder that the military spadework for the 1999 Kargil conflict was already under way even as Mr Sharif and the then Indian leader A B Vajpayee issued their optimistic Lahore Declaration a few months earlier.

On balance, it is clear from the professional assessment by Lt Gen (Retired) Ata Hasnain and from the political perspective of Mr Abdullah that India thinks that it can better ward off unpleasant surprises from Pakistan now than at the time of the Kargil conflict of 1999.

Sharif’s ‘Right’ Note

Dr Singh’s own view, as expressed by him on 1 October, aptly characterises the present state of Indo-Pak talks as diplomacy of sentiments rather than substance. He was responding to questions during an onboard media interaction while on his way back home from New York. He was specifically asked whether Mr Sharif “is being held back by the ISI and the Pakistan Army”. Dr Singh skirted the questioner’s references to the ISI and the Pakistan Army and, instead, summed up the essence of the current state of Indo-Pak relations as follows: “I very much hope that Nawaz Sharif succeeds. He is the democratically elected Prime Minister of a neighbouring country, and he has said all the right things about Indo-Pakistan relations. So, I sincerely hope and pray that he does succeed in carrying out his mission”.⁶

Positive sentiments and personal chemistry do facilitate difficult talks between the leaders of neighbouring countries with unresolved disputes. However, the bottom-line for improved relations between such neighbours is the building of mutual trust on a verifiable basis. These

⁵ <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/an-ambitious-ploy-in-the-heights/article52148...> (published and accessed on 9 October 2013)

⁶ Transcript of Prime Minister’s onboard media interaction during his return from USA, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/22278/Transcript+of+Prime+Ministers...>

aspects, surely not as novel as some high-tech artificial intelligence in diplomacy, are relevant to the outcome of the Singh-Sharif meeting in New York on 29 September.

Their informal talks, not to be mistaken for serious summit-like parleys, were held on the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly's annual session. The much-awaited meeting was preceded and followed by frequent narratives and counter-narratives about actual ceasefire violations across the Pakistan-India Line of Control (LOC).

'The Precondition' for Progress

Unsurprisingly, the only outcome of the meeting was a decision by the two leaders to mandate the DGMO on each side "to come up with a clear plan to restore the ceasefire and to make sure that it is enforced and stays in place".⁷ Annotating the decision immediately after the meeting, India's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon, who briefed Indian journalists, said: "They [the two leaders] were both agreed that the *precondition for a forward movement in the relationship*, which they both desire, *is really an improvement of the situation on the LOC* where there have been repeated ceasefire violations and incidents [since the truce that was agreed upon several years ago]".⁸ (Emphasis is added by the author).

The official Indian perception of the outcome of this Singh-Sharif meeting is essentially one of guarded attitude of giving the DGMOs a chance to succeed. A more categorical hope was voiced by the Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesman nearly four days after the talks. At a regular press briefing in Islamabad, the Spokesman, answering questions on the Sharif-Singh meeting, said: "The DGMOs of the two countries were directed to discuss the matter [of stabilising the situation on the LOC] and ensure that the ceasefire is respected. *We hope that this would lead to further engagement between the two governments for the resumption of composite dialogue*".⁹ (Emphasis is added by the author.)

Favoured by Islamabad today, the Indo-Pakistan "composite dialogue", also initiated several years ago, has meandered because of frequent complications in the bilateral interactions. Unsurprisingly, the most notable negative development was the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, which New Delhi and the wider international community have traced to the proactive anti-India forces in Pakistan.

In its current democratic transition, Pakistan is keen to persuade India to resume dialogue on all substantive issues including the "dispute" over Jammu and Kashmir. India's priorities, as spelt out by Mr Menon after the latest Singh-Sharif meeting, are different in a nuanced

⁷ This was disclosed by India's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon after the Singh-Sharif talks. For details of the Indian perception of the outcome of these talks, access: <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/22270/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+by+National+Security+Advisor+on+Meeting+between+Prime+Ministers+of+India+and+Pakistan+September+29+2013>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ This quotation is also from "a rush transcript" of the Pakistani press briefing on 3 October 2013; and this "may be updated", the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said. <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?prID=1488> (accessed on 7 October 2013)

manner. Mr Menon said: “Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif mentioned the incidents of terrorism that Pakistan is also suffering from. But he also said that there would be action on the Mumbai cases now that the Judicial Commission [of Pakistan] has been in India and has gathered depositions and evidence which they could use. ... My understanding is that both sides wish to see a better India-Pakistan relationship than [what] we have today, and that, in this [Singh-Sharif] meeting, it was also clear that for both of us [the] precondition is really to address the immediate issues that we have, which is *to restore peace and tranquillity along the Line of Control*. From our [Indian] point of view, an issue that is very important is to address the terrorism issue, and we are making progress on that. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif mentioned many issues from the Pakistani point of view as well. But I think, right now, *our effort [on both sides] is focused on making it possible to move towards a broader dialogue, and that stage has not come yet*”.¹⁰ (Emphasis is added by the author.)

Sensitivities beyond LOC Concerns

The new India-Pakistan agreement to task their DGMOs to restore ceasefire and to stabilise the LOC is a clear sign of going back to the basics. However, the two countries are also looking at their respective equations with both the United States and China. These equations are in a transitory or even transformative phase.

Islamabad is concerned about the nature and scope of the discussion on Pakistan that Dr Singh had with US President Barack Obama at the White House on 27 September, two days prior to the Singh-Sharif meeting that we are discussing. This is somewhat reminiscent of New Delhi’s consternation, a few years ago, at the way the US and China discussed South Asia for the first time. (South Asia is diplomatic shorthand for India-Pakistan equation).

From the Pakistani perspective, an issue to be watched closely is the implementation of the ‘U.S.-India Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation’ that was issued after the Obama-Singh meeting on 27 September. The crux of the Declaration is that “the United States and India share common security interests and place each other at the same level as their closest partners”.¹¹

It is possible to discuss whether the US has now become India’s “closest partner” in the defence domain (replacing Russia), or whether India is to America just as good as Washington’s closest partner (not ally) prior to September 2013. Arguably, one of America’s closest partners today, as distinct from closest military ally, is Singapore. Is Obama placing India in this league or on an altogether different plane? An additional factor, however, is that the US has now agreed to partner India in co-research, co-development, and co-production of high-tech military hardware. In all, therefore, India is being accepted by the US, and vice versa, as a military partner just below the rank of an ally.

¹⁰ These comments are drawn from the same source as cited in the N.7 above

¹¹ ‘U.S.-India Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation’, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/27/us-india-joint-declaration-defense-cooperation>

At another level, India, while tending its ties with China, will watch Beijing's interactions with Islamabad more closely than before. Significant new developments in this regard are the Sino-Pakistan moves for Karakoram Highway modernisation, the likely new steps towards a 'China-Pakistan economic corridor' and the development of Gwadar port in Pakistan as strategic projects.

Also not lost on India is the likely heightened relevance of Pakistan to the US in its calculus for post-2014 Afghanistan and in America's China policy into the future. For Pakistan, too, a matter of particular interest and concern is India's increasingly vibrant engagement with China, although the improving Sino-Indian relationship is not problem-free at all.

In such a grand sweep of emerging realities, interesting, if not also intriguing, is New Delhi's accent on "peace and tranquillity" along the India-Pakistan LOC – the standard terminology which India and China have adopted with reference to their Line of Actual Control.

Diplomats and scholars have, over the decades, deployed various terminologies to describe the deeply troubled Pakistan-India relationship. Stephen P Cohen has now focused on 'Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum'.¹² With Mr Menon using the phraseology of "peace and tranquillity" in the Pakistani context, it is possible that New Delhi prefers to apply the somewhat-practical Sino-Indian model of engagement to the problematic efforts at striking some form of Indo-Pak equilibrium.

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¹² This is the title of Stephen P Cohen's new book on the India-Pakistan equation.