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A New Phase in India-Pakistan Tensions: China's Rising Stake

India's "surgical strikes" at the "terrorist launch pads" in an area controlled by Pakistan in late-September 2016 – an event that Islamabad has vigorously sought to dispute – have produced an altogether new dynamic in the deeply-chequered relations between these two South Asian neighbours. Significantly, China – Pakistan's "all-weather strategic partner" – has made nuanced statements that reveal its heightened stake in the evolving situation. The paper evaluates this triangular equation.

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A psychological matrix of high sentiments and low expectations, albeit at different times, has until recently coloured the India-Pakistan engagement since the advent of Narendra Modi as India's Prime Minister in May 2014. Indeed, this seemed to be emerging as a new-normal on the India-Pakistan front when the uneasy relationship between these two South Asian neighbours took an unusual turn in September 2016.

The latest flare-up of military tensions on both sides of the Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has produced an impasse with unpredictable consequences.

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Geographically and geopolitically, J&K straddles the LOC, the line itself being a defining feature of the current state of fragility in India-Pakistan relationship.

On 29 September 2016, India dramatically announced that it successfully carried out pre-emptive “surgical strikes”² against the terrorist launch pads³ in several sectors of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) in the night of 28/29 September.⁴ POK is called Azad (Free) Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) in Pakistani political lexicon. The Pakistani Defence Ministry quickly reacted, saying that “there has been no surgical strike by India”. Instead, the Ministry said, “there had been cross border fire initiated and conducted by India which is [an] existential phenomenon”. The statement added that the Pakistani troops had “strongly and befittingly responded”. Contending that India was merely “rebranding cross border fire as surgical strike”, Pakistan said that “if there is [going to be] a surgical strike on *Pakistani soil*, [the] same will be strongly responded”.⁵ (Emphasis added). Such a denial from the Pakistani military establishment was in tune with the often-deeply-chequered relationship between Pakistan and India. But a careful reading of the statements from both sides is more illuminating, as we shall see.

What’s behind the Crossed Line(s) of Communication?

New Delhi has for long sought to sensitise the larger international community to the frequent infiltration of terrorists, sponsored and trained in Pakistan, into India across the LOC. Islamabad, for its part, regularly denies the occurrence of anti-India terrorist-traffic across the LOC. Significantly now, India’s Director General Military Operations (DGMO), Lieutenant General Ranbir Singh, who broke the news of the “surgical strikes” inside POK (AJK), recounted “Pakistan’s commitment made in January 2004 not to allow its soil [,] or territory

² India’s Defence Ministry, while publicising its pre-emptive military action against an unspecified number of anti-India terrorists inside Pakistan-controlled territory in the night of 28/29 September 2016, characterised the action as “surgical strikes”. By that, the Ministry portrayed India’s pre-emptive military action as a precise effort at eliminating the malignant targets (as seen from New Delhi’s standpoint) and causing no collateral damage (as in a successful medical operation).

³ India’s Defence Ministry characterised the sites, where the unspecified number of anti-India terrorists were spotted, as “terrorist launch pads”. By this, the Ministry conveyed the message that those terrorists were poised to attack targets in India at any time, thereby necessitating the pre-emptive “surgical strikes”.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, *Transcript of Joint Briefing by MEA and MoD (September 29, 2016)*, (Note: MoD is India’s Ministry of Defence), http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27446/Transcript_of_Joi... (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 29 September 2016.)

⁵ Government of Pakistan, https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&cat=army&latest=1#army1 (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 29 September 2016.)

under its control [i.e., POK/AJK and ‘Northern Areas’] for any terrorist activities against India”.⁶ It is significant that India’s DGMO has referred to the bilateral commitment that Pakistan itself gave India in 2004. To this extent, India has ceased to rely on the reported disclosures by the United States officials in the early-2000s that Pakistan had undertaken to refrain from allowing terrorists to use its territories and areas under its control for strikes against India. More importantly, New Delhi is not alone in raising the issue of terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Afghanistan, Pakistan’s another neighbour, as well as the United States and even China, Islamabad’s “all-weather partner”, have raised similar concerns, all documented in the public domain.

Now, a careful reading of the statements made by India and Pakistan, in the context of the latest “surgical strikes”, is revealing. India emphasised that the strikes were carried out “*at [the] launch pads along the Line of Control*”, i.e. inside POK (AJK) and *not on Pakistani soil* itself. (Emphasis added). In contrast, the Pakistani Defence Ministry, while disputing this Indian version, asserted Islamabad’s preparedness to “strongly respond” to any Indian “surgical strike on *Pakistani soil*” per se. (Emphasis added). India does not recognise POK (AJK) as *Pakistani soil*, and more significantly, AJK (POK) is *not* counted by Islamabad itself as a constituent province of Pakistan under its own Constitution. Such a logical interpretation reinforces India’s version of events across the LOC in the night of 28/29 September 2016.

The Pakistani civilian establishment, too, noted that Prime Minister “Muhammad Nawaz Sharif strongly condemned the unprovoked and naked *aggression* of Indian forces resulting in martyrdom of two Pakistani soldiers along the LOC”⁷ on 28 September 2016. (Emphasis added). Let us look at a relevant aspect. It is simply common sense in international politics that an *intrusion* by the armed forces of one or more state(s) into the acknowledged- or controlled-territories of one or more other state(s) constitutes *aggression*. Viewed in this perspective, Sharif’s choice of the word “aggression” tends to reinforce India’s version of precision- or surgical-strikes against select targets inside POK (AJK), which Pakistan controls.

⁶ Same source as in Note 2

⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, Government of Pakistan, http://www.pmo.gov.pk/news_details.php?news_id=581 (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 29 September 2016.)

Pakistanis can counter-argue that their military and civilian leaders may not have been precise in communicating their denial of India's "surgical strikes". At this writing, however, there is no authoritative report from the United Nations expressing doubts over or confirming the occurrence of India's "surgical strikes" along and across the LOC in the night of 28/29 September 2016. For reasons beyond the scope of this paper, the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) continues to operate inside POK (AJK), but not on the Indian side of the LOC. So, a week after the "surgical strikes" it is not clear whether the UNMOGIP has indeed verified Pakistan's version that India had not launched such "surgical strikes" at all inside POK (AJK). Moreover, as this is written, no major government, with "eyes in the sky" satellites, has refuted India's version of these "surgical strikes". Above all, though, the ground reality of heightened tensions along and across the Pakistan-India LOC matters more than anything else in this theatre.

For New Delhi, its "surgical strikes", publicly portrayed as the first of their kind, were necessitated in the context of "the terrorist attacks at Poonch and Uri [along the LOC in India's J&K] on 11 and 18th of September [2016] respectively". A more immediate reason for these strikes was the "very credible and specific [Indian] information" about "some terrorist teams" being poised to strike at India from their "launch pads"⁸ in POK (AJK).

Emerging Strategic Realities

Truly significant are two strategic aspects of this sequence of events – namely, the death of several Indian soldiers in the terrorist attack at Uri (which Islamabad hinted at as an attack "staged"⁹ by India itself) and India's "surgical strikes" on select targets inside POK (AJK) in the night of 28/29 September 2016. One of these important strategic aspects relates to the deployment, or otherwise, of Pakistan's "tactical nuclear weapons" (i.e. miniaturised nuclear pellets for close-range attacks), while the other pertains to the stakes of China, Pakistan's "all-weather strategic partner", in the future of India-Pakistan relationship.

⁸ Same source as in Note 2

⁹ Pakistan's Right of Reply to Indian Foreign Minister's Statement in UN General Assembly today (2016-09-26), <http://mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDMxNA,,> (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 28 September 2016.)

On the issue of Pakistan's "tactical nuclear weapons", it is evident that the Indian soldiers who went into POK (AJK) in the night of 28/29 September 2016, as in the reinforced¹⁰ Indian version, were not deterred or thwarted by the presumed presence of Pakistan's "tactical nuclear weapons". However, Pakistan's reported deployment of "tactical nuclear weapons" somewhere is borne out by an informal proposal that the US had made to prevent such deployment. It has been stated in the "Strategic Survey 2016", published by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Affairs (IISS), as follows: "In October 2015, Pakistan rejected an informal US proposal to halt its introduction of tactical nuclear weapons, which many countries consider to be destabilising, and to limit the range of its missile systems in return for access to [US and global] civilian nuclear technology".¹¹

As for China's stake in the future of India-Pakistan relationship, Beijing has not publicly endorsed Islamabad's latest flurry of renewed demands that the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC's) relevant Resolutions, adopted in the late-1940s and early-1950s, be implemented to determine J&K's future constitutional status. On 21 September 2016, a week before the latest turn of events on the India-Pakistan front, China said: "Both India and Pakistan are significant countries in the region. We hope that *the two countries* will step up communication and dialogue, properly deal with their differences and jointly contribute to regional peace, stability and security".¹² (Emphasis added). Noteworthy is that China, which made this comment in the context of Islamabad's version of Indian "atrocities" in the Kashmir valley, explicitly called for an India-Pakistan dialogue, with no reference to the old UNSC Resolutions.

In a subtle shift away from this position, China said as follows on 26 September 2016: "The Kashmir issue is left over from history. We hope that *relevant parties* can properly resolve this issue peacefully through dialogue and consultation".¹³ (Emphasis added). Surely, Beijing did

¹⁰ The credibility of the Indian version of "surgical strikes" has been reinforced by the usage of certain phrases by the Pakistani military and civilian establishments, as argued in the text of this paper.

¹¹ The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Strategic Survey 2016: The Annual Review of World Affairs*, Routledge, UK, USA, and Canada, September 2016, p.50.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1399373.shtml (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 28 September 2016.)

¹³ Ibid, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1400731.shtml (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 28 September 2016.)

not call for the implementation of the UNSC Resolutions, which in any case were adopted when Taiwan ('Republic of China') – *not* today's-powerful People's Republic of China (better known as the only China) – was a veto-empowered Permanent Member of the world body. Significantly, however, China has now shifted from its advocacy of India-Pakistan bilateralism to a plea for dialogue among "*relevant parties*". In the absence of China's authoritative identification of the "*relevant parties*", it is arguable that they will consist of not only India and Pakistan but also China as well as the representatives of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in J&K.

Beijing's increasing stake in the Indo-Pakistani tussle over J&K is evident from the Chinese civil-military investments in POK (AJK) and 'Northern Areas', as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. China's long-standing interests in POK (AJK) and 'Northern Areas' have been heightened by the CPEC's mapped-route that passes through these territories which remain in dispute between India and Pakistan.

In the context of the turn of events along and across the LOC on 28/29 September 2016, China raised its stakes further by saying as follows on 30 September: "Since India-Pakistan relations were strained [on this latest occasion] China has been in touch with the two sides, urging them to exercise restraint, strengthen dialogues, and properly settle relevant disputes. China will continue with its efforts to promote *peace talks* in a proper way *in light of the development on the ground*".¹⁴ (Emphasis added).

China has now clearly projected itself as a restraining force on the India-Pakistan front. More importantly, Beijing wants to promote "peace talks" (arguably, for ceasefire etc. as different from political negotiations) between India and Pakistan, at least for a start. Above all, China's referral point for these efforts is "*the [latest] development[s] on the ground*"¹⁵ – these will include Islamabad's version of events inside J&K, besides India's and the wider international community's (including China's) experiences in dealing with Pakistan. Beijing's statement of 30 September 2016 requires to be watched in regard to the increasing Chinese stake in the India-Pakistan equation or its absence.

¹⁴ Ibid, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1402904.shtml (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 1 October 2016.)

¹⁵ It will be illogical to be dismissive of these English translations of China's official statements that are made in Mandarin, because they are translated into English by professional interpreters who are employed by the Chinese Foreign Ministry which interacts with the wider international community on a daily basis.

Modi's Earlier Diplomatic Initiatives and Tactics

A brief account of the India-Pakistan engagement since Modi's assumption of office will help clarify how the two countries have meandered towards their current showdown. Modi first held cordial talks with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif when the latter attended the former's ceremonial assumption of office in May 2014. They agreed to resume the foreign-secretary-level bilateral talks, but this soon came to naught. Modi, unlike a previous Prime Minister of India, did not want to countenance Islamabad's exclusive talks with the separatist Muslim-Kashmiri leaders in India along a parallel track of the Indo-Pakistani dialogue process itself. Modi's reluctance was traceable to New Delhi's unambiguous historical position that J&K, in its entirety, is an integral sub-national State (or, province) of the Republic of India. Pakistan, for its part, continues to dispute the fact that Britain accepted the erstwhile-princely-state of J&K's accession to the newly-independent India, instead of the newly-created Pakistan, when the British decolonised the Indian sub-continent in 1947.¹⁶

For a variety of reasons outside the purview of this paper, a portion of the erstwhile-princely-state of J&K went into, and remains in, the hands of Pakistan. India characterises this area as POK (AJK in Islamabad's political lexicon). Three Pakistan-India wars (in the late-1940s, 1965, and 1971) led to a bilaterally-accepted LOC that slices through almost the entire J&K. The LOC segregates POK (AJK) from the rest of the State (or, province) which enjoys a special constitutional status as an integral part of India. Unlike the entirely-Muslim POK (AJK), India's Jammu and Kashmir has a demographic mix of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. This demographic mosaic, often upheld by India as being emblematic of its secular democracy, lay at the heart of Modi's rejection of Pakistan's exclusive talks with the separatist Muslim-Kashmiris. Modi's action led to the cancellation of the planned Indo-Pakistani foreign-secretary-level talks in 2014.

¹⁶ While there is copious literature on how Independent India absorbed into its fold the erstwhile-princely-state of J&K, a former British diplomat, who was successively his country's High Commissioner to Pakistan and India, categorically chronicled that Britain had officially accepted J&K's accession to India in 1947. Read Sir Morrice James (Lord Saint Brides), *Pakistan Chronicle, Edited, with an introduction, by Peter Lyon*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, Pakistan, 1993, pp. 25-26. For an academic version preferred in Pakistan, read, in its entirety, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy 1846-1990*, by Alastair Lamb, Oxford Pakistan Paperbacks, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1993.

In 2015, Modi and Sharif met three times – first, on the margins of a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at Ufa (Russia) on 10 July; later, during the global climate-conference in Paris in December; and finally, at Sharif’s residence in Lahore on Christmas Day. They had met at Ufa under the penumbra of New Delhi’s angst over China’s ‘technical hold-up’ of India’s move for sanctions on Pakistan at a UN anti-terror panel in June. India wanted action against Pakistan for its judicial release of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, despite his suspected involvement as a mastermind behind the terrorist strikes in Mumbai (India) in 2008. India’s move in 2015 flowed from the fact that Lakhvi and his outfit were by then proscribed under the global anti-terror Magna Charta, the UNSC Resolution 1267.

At Ufa, Modi conferred with Chinese President Xi Jinping before talking separately to Sharif; this resulted in an India-Pakistan agreement that their National Security Advisors (NSAs) should meet. This, too, turned into a false start:¹⁷ the planned NSAs’ meeting in Delhi was called off hours before the appointed time on 24 August 2015, as Pakistan contested India’s stand that their accord at Ufa had given their NSAs a limited mandate to focus exclusively on terrorism-related issues.¹⁸ Rethinking after this impasse, the two countries went ahead with a four-cornered meeting, in Bangkok in December 2015, among their NSAs and foreign secretaries. What followed was an agreement to break the logjam of entrenched diplomatic positions and, instead, begin a “comprehensive bilateral dialogue”. Now back in focus, after the failure of the earlier ‘composite dialogue’ between the two sides, were India’s sense of being the relentless victim of terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and Islamabad’s persistent demand for a final settlement of the Kashmir issue.

Implicit in the accord in 2015 for a “comprehensive bilateral dialogue” was the elimination of any role for any third party, including the United Nations, in seeking and implementing a solution of the Kashmir issue. This accord was followed by Modi’s meeting with Sharif on the occasion of the global climate conference in Paris, and Modi’s surprise visit to Lahore from Kabul to greet Sharif on his birthday – Christmas Day – in 2015. Critics dismissed Modi’s Christmas-Day journey to Lahore as vacuous political showmanship; he soon found himself

¹⁷ For a scholarly interpretation of the India-Pakistan understanding at Ufa, read Subrata Kumar Mitra, *After Ufa: Why the India-Pakistan Dialogue needs to be reconceptualised on the lines of ‘Principled Negotiations’*, ISAS Working Paper No. 209 (17 September 2015), available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>

¹⁸ For an analysis of the diplomatic impasse that led to the cancellation of NSA-level Indo-Pak talks in August 2015, read P S Suryanarayana, *New Cross-Currents in the India-China-Pakistan Triangle*, ISAS Insights No. 290 (2 September 2015), available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu>

wading through the shockwaves of a terrorist attack at an Indian Air Force base in Pathankot in early-January 2016. India saw the smoking-gun in Pakistan, and Sharif sought to reassure Modi by promising to cooperate in identifying the perpetrators of that terrorist attack. But very few lent credence to Sharif's assurance, because of the prevalent view that the Army, not the civilian establishment, constitutes Pakistan's axis of governance.¹⁹

The reverberations of the terrorist strike at Pathankot set the clock back on the Indo-Pakistani accord for a "comprehensive *bilateral* dialogue", just as the terrorist rampage at Mumbai in 2008 had made a mockery of the earlier "composite dialogue". A poser in early-October 2016, "in [the] light of the development[s] on the ground", Beijing's phrase, is whether China will increasingly guide its "all-weather partner", Pakistan, in reconfiguring its relations with India.

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¹⁹ For an assessment of the Pakistan Army's role as a deep state in the country's praetorian and/or civilian politics, read, among others, T.V. Paul, *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*, Random House India, Gurgaon (India), 2014; and C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014.