



A case for aggressive diplomacy

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Indian state responses cannot be reactive to the agenda of terrorist groups

- Pakistan and India are strange nations.
- Just as the conflict after India's bombing of the Balakot terror camp was winding down, Pakistan alleged on March 5 that it had thwarted the entry of an Indian submarine into its waters.
- On the same evening, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry issued a statement that its High Commissioner to India, Sohail Mahmood, would be returning to Delhi and talks with India on the Kartarpur Corridor would go ahead.
- It was a signal that tensions were officially being defused.
- India confirmed the talks on Kartarpur and also sent back Indian High Commissioner Ajay Bisaria to Islamabad.

Winding down tensions

- It was U.S. President Donald Trump who provided the first clear indication of the involvement of major powers in defusing tensions between India and Pakistan.
- Apart from the Americans, the Chinese and Saudis also seem smack in the middle of the India-Pakistan equation.
- For the two governments, given that the score was level — one had shot down a F-16 and the other had shot down an MiG-21 — they could now respond positively to global concerns.
- The Modi government's decision to go ahead with the Kartarpur talks days after tensions were at the peak, and after withdrawing the Most Favoured Nation status to Pakistan, is bizarre, but it serves two purposes.
- There is little doubt that India got away with its pre-emptive strike in Balakot because Pakistan's denials that it has nothing to do with fostering groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) carry no credibility, including among thinking members of its own

civil society.

- There's also little doubt that India and Pakistan narrowly escaped a full-fledged conflict, the extent of which can never really be predicted amid social media propaganda, fake videos, domestic pressures and ugly jingoism on both sides.

The Vajpayee years

- The India-Pakistan nuclear 'deterrent' was first put to test by General Pervez Musharraf, who planned the Kargil incursion months after Pakistan went publicly nuclear in response to the Indian nuclear tests of May 11 and 13, 1998.
- Pakistan went to great lengths to obtain its nuclear capability to insulate itself against India and no "miltabishment" can survive there if it's unable to even the score with India.
- The nuclear option is built into the trajectory of its survival as a state.
- India can ignore such default Pakistani options at its own — and the region's — peril.
- Looking strong in an election year might be good for a political party's prospects, but will do nothing to enhance India's credentials as a responsible state that thinks long term.
- During the Kargil war in 1999, after the Parliament attack in 2001, and post the Mumbai attack in 2008, two Prime Ministers of India had the option of retaliation, but they did not exercise it.
- Instead, India's patience projected the responsible nature of the state, which was in stark opposition to Pakistan's tattered credibility.

Talks and more talks

- A conventional response to terrorist groups can demonstrate intent, but does very little to whittle down their abilities.
- Covert capabilities coupled with deft and persistent diplomacy is the only way forward in such difficult circumstances.
- Indian state responses cannot be reactive to the agenda of terrorist groups, howsoever brutal their actions are.
- A calm, mature, informed and long-term strategy with aggressive diplomacy at its core, one that leverages India's economic strength, remains the country's best bet to deal with the terrorist threat from Pakistani soil.