



SADF COMMENT

India's Recurring Pak Conundrum: To talk or not to talk?

Shairee Malhotra

India must support the forces of peace within Pakistan and continue with talks despite the Pathankot attack

Following the attack at an Indian Air Base in Pathankot Punjab on January 2 by Pakistani terrorists that killed seven military personnel and wounded several others, and the subsequent attack on the Indian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan, Indo-Pak relations are in a familiar conundrum and a sense of déjà vu pervades the current situation. The militant group [Jaish-e-Mohammad](#) close to Pakistani intelligence is believed to be behind the attack. Whether the Army in Pakistan was aware or [complicit](#) in the attack is unclear (although quite likely) with contrary assessments emerging. However, [India's response](#) has been predictable - Pakistan needs to act firmly against the terrorists or the scheduled foreign secretary level [talks](#) will be suspended. On a highly refreshing note, Pakistani authorities have exhibited prompt action, conducted several [raids and arrests](#) based on inquiries and Indian evidence, and even created a [Joint Investigations Team](#).

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Keywords:

India, Pakistan, Indo-Pak relations, Modi, Sharif

Pakistan's behavior, famously referred to as "[playing Russian Roulette](#)" by the Americans, has historically at the very least been dubious and duplicitous - beating around the bush, going around in circles, demanding more "concrete" evidence, etc. have long been tactics used to avoid action against a string of terror incidents against India. After a lot of back and forth, the attackers of the 2008 Mumbai attacks have still not been brought to justice, and right after the deadly Peshawar school attack that resulted in a desperate [revamping](#) of Pakistan's terrorism policy, the mastermind Zaikur Rehman Lakhvi was [granted bail](#) in December 2014.

Importantly, the reactions of both leaders this time have been mature and inspiring. Far from the traditional attitude of denial adopted by the Pakistani establishment following such incidents, PM Sharif has [demonstrated](#) a readiness to show support, accept India's evidence and take action. PM Modi despite a hawkish pre-election stance on Pakistan seems to have shifted from his belligerent rhetoric, and has [refrained](#) from blaming the Pakistani state. The relationship between the two leaders from Sharif's attendance at Modi's swearing in ceremony to the [gifting of mangoes](#) and the ensuing [saree-shawl diplomacy](#), has been replete with symbolic gestures and diplomacy.

Efforts at rapprochement have most often been met with increased violence and controversy within Pakistan, and illustrate the tensions in strategic policy in a country that lacks a cohesive power centre. Massive protests that erupted in mid-2014 against the civilian government intended by the Army to [curtail](#) an apparently transgressing Sharif were such an instance, as was the [Taliban attack](#) on the Indian consulate in Herat, Afghanistan in May 2014 on the eve of PM Modi's inauguration. Indeed, the recent attack in Pathankot took place after Modi's surprise and unplanned [drop-in to Lahore](#) to meet with Sharif during his visit to Kabul. India is well aware that toxic forces exist within Pakistan that are waiting to act against any semblance of peace and progression of ties with India, and the above-mentioned incidents of violence in the past year are testimony to the deadly opposition the Sharif government faces in its overtures towards India. PM Sharif has worked ardently towards a rapprochement with India despite the internal challenges he faces, and has been viewed as tilting the civil-military equation that has historically been in favor of the military, and pursuing [policies](#), particularly his reconciliation attempts with India, that directly clash with the Army's source of power.

Pakistan's [security doctrine](#), responsible for the disproportionate influence the military enjoys over all realms of politics, continues to be dictated by the almost [mythical Indian threat](#). Through successful manipulation of the citizenry, the Army has managed to effectively guarantee popular support and ensure that the [public shares the military's strategic concerns and priorities](#), thereby

sustaining its legitimacy and entrenchment within the Pakistani consciousness, despite the heavy costs its policies impose on the general public. Only the forces of democracy and progress can overcome the siege mentality perpetuated by the military's national security paradigm that has plagued Pakistan since its inception and led to its downward spiral.

India must consistently engage with the democratically elected civilian government in Pakistan and recognize the internal complexities within Pakistan. Unlike India, Pakistan is a country with several centres of power - the Army, the civilian government, and a competent intelligence agency. This internally complex scenario coupled with the challenges of terrorism, militancy, sectarian strife, and an underperforming economy have further exacerbated Pakistan's dysfunctions. Sharif's government is itself battling with the lopsided power structure within the country where the generals have traditionally pulled the strings.

India would do well to come up with a concrete, substantial and consistent long term Pakistan policy, rather than respond to events in an episodic and ad-hoc manner. India is no stranger to terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistani non-state actors, and while the military in Pakistan is often tacitly complicit in these violent incidents on account of their propelling of groups or their overt support of the same, Pakistan is currently being ruled by a democratically civilian government itself at odds with the country's military establishment. (PM Nawaz Sharif himself comes with a [wounded history](#) on account of his overthrow through the Musharraf-led coup d'état in 1999.) The cancellation of talks would undermine his government and play right into the hands of both - the Army sustaining its ubiquitous status, and the terrorists as proof that their destabilisation schemes work; and the many hawks within Pakistan would have won the day.

Along with consistent engagement with the Pakistani civilian government, India urgently needs to scale up its intelligence agencies and counter-terrorism abilities. The attack espoused crucial [shortcomings](#) and a lack of preparedness on the Indian side, who despite early warnings and [information](#), responded inadequately and uncertainly, resulting in too many casualties and too much time taken to neutralize six terrorists. With the [appointment](#) of top operations man Ajit Doval and Former Chief of the Intelligence Bureau as the National Security Adviser (NSA) to PM Modi, India has clearly recognised the importance of this. India needs to be well prepared for the likelihood of such attacks because several forces in Pakistan remain averse to any progress in relations with India, and PM Modi's efforts to engage with the Pakistani civilian government that is more genuine in its efforts on a true rapprochement with India must not be held hostage by these.

India must take the reins of the detente into its own hands or risk following a largely reactive policy at the behest of terrorists. With the seeming resurgence of JeM, it is more important than ever for India to support the forces of peace in Pakistan and together prevail over the forces of violence.

Biography of the author:

Shairee Malhotra is an International Relations analyst. She has an MA International Relations from Queen Mary University of London, and has worked with the European Institute for Asian Studies in Brussels, and foreign policy think tank Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations in Mumbai.