

Encirclement of Pakistan: What awaits Pakistan under the Growing Indo-Afghan Relations?



Contributed by Ms. Sitwat Waqar, CRSS Research Fellow

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Context

For years, particularly since the unfolding of the anti-terror war in October 2001, apprehensions of encirclement by India and Afghanistan have been growing. For most of the time, Pakistan's security apparatus viewed the growing Indo-Afghan-American relations as an unusual "Pakistan-focused nexus" meant to "encircle" Pakistan. Much of Pakistan's security doctrine has since aimed at preempting and neutralizing those threats emanating from its western and eastern borders. However, those apprehensions have assumed alarming levels in view of the recent string of intimidating statements from the Indian prime minister to the defense and foreign ministers as well as the national security advisor. These have not only evoked strong reaction from Pakistan's military and the civilian leadership, but also alarmed external players such as the United States, which believes growing Indo-Pak tensions, will also play out in Afghanistan and undermine President Ashraf Ghani's peace mission.

Pakistan's army and the government have responded furiously to the Indian statements and warned New Delhi to desist from what they said "adventurism," thus pushing the two countries further away from the goal of resumption of dialogue that has remained stalled since India suspended foreign secretary talks last August.

The assertive statements by the Indian defense minister Manohar Parikar and the national security advisor Ajit Doval in particular also practically blow the lid off the destabilization campaign that India may have been running inside Pakistan with the support of militant groups masquerading as Baloch nationalists and Taliban.

Are some of the latest developments proving the fears of encirclement right? Events of the past few weeks certainly point to an unusual situation which might eventually translate into an armed conflict – even if limited - between the two nuclear-armed south Asian neighbors.

Background

Between 2004 and 2013, Pakistan has suffered at least 58,000 casualties, including civilians, journalists, security forces and those killed in drones, in the US-led War on Terror, a study conducted by a group of international physicians' organizations reveals.¹ A brutal massacre of at least 146 schoolchildren and teachers in the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, completely turned the situation in Pakistan and united the civilian-military leadership into an indiscriminate campaign against terrorist groups operating in different parts of the country.

On January 22, 2015, the government declared the assets and accounts of Jamaat-ud-Dawa to be frozen, along with imposing travel restrictions on its leader, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed. Banning JuD was a significant step to underscore of Pakistan's seriousness in the fight against terrorist outfits. India has long considered JuD as a front for the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant outfit and holds it responsible for masterminding the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The US state department also named JuD as a "foreign terrorist organization" in 2012.²

In February 2015, as reportedly sought by US President Obama, Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened talks with PM Nawaz Sharif and conveyed his decision to send his Foreign Secretary to Pakistan.³ Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's visit to Pakistan in March 2015 provided both countries with an

¹ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/860790/80000-pakistanis-killed-in-us-war-on-terror-report/>

² <http://tribune.com.pk/story/822087/revealed-govt-decides-to-ban-haqqani-network-jud/>

³ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/risky-call-modi-s-pak-gambit-could-embolden-sponsors-of-terror/article1-1317884.aspx>

opportunity to discuss, inter alia other pertinent matters, the need for rigorous efforts in rooting out terrorism from the region and was welcomed by Pakistan.⁴ The intent of the Indian administration in earnestly rooting out the menace of terrorism, however, became suspicious when the Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar, on May 22, 2015, made a radical statement admitting to India's plans to fight terror with terror. Speaking at an event in New Delhi, the minister used the Hindi phrase "kante se kanta nikalna" (which means 'removing a thorn with a thorn') and vowed to take "pro-active steps to prevent a 26/11 type attack".

The Press Trust of India reported him as saying, "Many terrorists are drawn into terrorism because of financial allurements... They are paid money for it. If such people are there, why not use them? What is the harm in using terrorists against terrorists? Why should our soldiers be in the front?"⁵ In other words, the minister justified state-sponsored terrorism as a legitimate tool in fighting terrorism.

By stating such a resolve, the Indian minister only unequivocally announced that India would follow no rules when containing terrorist activities, i.e., instead terrorism would be promoted for the purpose of preventing it on the Indian soil.⁶ Moreover, according to Sartaz Aziz, Adviser to Pakistan PM on National Security and Foreign Affairs, a minister of the Indian elected government openly advocating the use of terrorism against another country to protect its land provides contrary evidence to India's own continued allegations that Pakistan has been sponsoring terrorist activities in India.⁷ "Had this statement been made by any Pakistani official, the international community, particularly the west, would have already moved a resolution to the UN Security Council", said Awais Ahmed

⁴ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/847116/loc-samjhota-express-among-other-issues-discussed-with-jaishankar-aizaz/>

⁵ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Army-making-targeted-kills-of-terrorists-in-JK-Manohar-Parrikar-says/articleshow/47378303.cms>

⁶ *Khawaja Asif slams Indian minister's statement of 'sponsoring terrorism to counter terrorism'*

⁷ <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-6-321631-Lets-fight-terror-with-terrorism>

Khan Laghari, Chairman of the Foreign affairs Committee in the National Assembly of Pakistan.⁸

During his visit to China in May 2015, Indian PM Narendra Modi, in a shocking statement, also spoke “very strongly” against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) going through Pakistan and termed the project as totally “unacceptable”. This was revealed at a press conference by India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj on May 31.⁹ Pakistan-China Economic Corridor was announced during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Pakistan, a month before Modi’s visit to China. Interestingly, a senior Pakistani official told the Express Tribune that Beijing had also alerted the Pakistani agencies regarding “many foreign hostile intelligence agencies” that might be instigating terrorist strikes targeting the “Belt and Road” projects in Pakistan. Among these hostile agencies, the Chinese intelligence shared RAW was at the frontline to sabotage the CPEC project.¹⁰ Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), which is known to be working under the direct control of Prime Minister Modi now, has also reportedly expanded its budget to \$145 million.¹¹

Modi’s visit to China was followed by his visit to Bangladesh at the end of May 2015. At a ceremony where he was awarded with the ‘Bangladesh Liberation War Honour’ from President Abdul Hamid, Modi revealed he had also fought alongside Mukti Bahini in the Satyagraha Movement launched by Jana Sangh to divide Pakistan in 1971. Modi stated it was every Indian’s desire to divide Pakistan and establish Bangladesh.¹² Furthermore, prior to becoming the Indian President, Modi was widely known for his right-wing Hindu nationalist politics and his notorious role in mass Hindu riots against the Muslims in his state during his tenure as its Chief Minister.

⁸ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/895755/pakistan-should-handover-militants-to-kabul-in-bid-to-revive-peace-talks-senate-panel/>

⁹ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/895611/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-unacceptable-modi-tells-china/>

¹⁰ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/890650/raw-at-frontline-to-sabotage-economic-corridor-china-warns-pakistan/>

¹¹ <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-6-321631-Lets-fight-terror-with-terrorism>

¹² The News International. June 08, 2015. “Indian Forces Fought along Mukti Bahini: Modi”.

Ironically, the Indian minister's statement on May 22 came following Pakistan's release of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, the operational head of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and one of the six Indian-alleged masterminds of 26/11 Mumbai bombings, from Adiala jail in April, 2015. The Pakistani court acquitted him, citing legal grounds such as want of evidence. US Ambassador to India Richard Verma termed it as a mistake by Pakistan.¹³ Also, ironically, India's permanent representative to the UN Asoke Mukherjee wrote a letter to the UN's Sanctions' Committee terming Lakhvi's release by the Pakistani court a violation of the UN resolution 1267 and Washington has since demanded that Lakhvi be arrested again. The ISI has persistently held that there is no evidence to convict Lakhvi for the 26/11 Mumbai attack while India, which claims to have evidence incriminating him, does not want to share it due to its sensitivity.¹⁴

Such criticism also overlooks the state of Pakistan's senior judiciary which has been ascendant, assertive and fearlessly independent in the last few years. The judicial system in Pakistan rests on the same complex but dated criminal procedure code that India practices. It is often exploited by lawyers to the hilt even to get known criminals off the hook.

In February 2014, former Director of India's Intelligence Bureau and currently the National Security Adviser to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Ajit Kumar Doval, had also shared similar radical views as the recent Indian minister's statement. He expounded on explicit tactics and strategies aimed at "smothering" Pakistan while delivering the 10th Nani Palkhivala Memorial Lecture to Indian students at SASTRA University. Ajit Doval advocated the use of what he termed as a "defensive offensive mode", a "fourth generation war" which would bypass the deterrence posed by Pakistan's nuclear weapons, to attack Pakistan's vulnerabilities. While nuclear deterrence falls in the realm of an offensive mode, India's 'defensive offensive' strategy would aim at sabotaging "Pakistan's economy, internal security, political institutions; isolating it internationally, exposing its terrorist activities, defeating its policies in Afghanistan and, generally, making it difficult for

¹³ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/883647/lakhvis-release-from-adiala-a-mistake-by-pakistan-us-envoy/>

¹⁴ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/880051/india-seeks-un-intervention-over-lakhvis-release/>

Pakistan to manage its internal political balance or internal security”. He stated that terrorists are only mercenaries who can be bought by offering them lucrative packages and also threatened, “You do one Mumbai, you may lose Balochistan. There is no nuclear war involved in that. There’s no engagement of troops. If you know the tricks, we know the tricks better than you”.¹⁵

In May 2015, Mr. Parrikar also acknowledged that the Indian army has been undertaking surgical strikes against terrorists rather than random operations in an interview with the Times of India.¹⁶ “There are certain things that I obviously cannot discuss here. But if there is any country planning something against my country, we will definitely take some pro-active steps,” he also added.¹⁷

In October 2013, an investigation involving a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) case in India revealed a spy military intelligence unit, called the Technical Services Division (TSD), which had been created by an ex Indian Army Chief General VK Singh in 2008. An official serving the unit openly revealed to the Hindustan Times that the unit’s main aim had been to combat “the rising trend of state-sponsored terrorism by the ISI” and the unit thus developed contacts across the Line of Control in a bid to infiltrate the inner circle of Hafiz Saeed, the maverick chief of the outlawed Lashkare Taiba (LeT). A scrutiny of Army documents by the Hindustan Times confirmed that the spook unit had even been approved by the Director General Military Intelligence, Vice Chief and Chief of Army Staff of India. Among the operations it carried out, it was responsible for the Operation Rehbar 1, 2, 3 in Kashmir and Operation Deep Strike in Pakistan. The unit while preparing, planning and executing special operations neutralizing enemy efforts within the countries of interest by covert means also covered any tracks leading back to the organization. The unit was later disbanded¹⁸

Pakistani officials also point to the Indian “RAW’s participation in instigating militancy in Pakistan by profusely providing financial and weapon support to

¹⁵ <http://playit.pk/watch?v=MI44LwterWo>

¹⁶ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1183867/india-killing-terrorists-in-surgical-strikes-says-minister>

¹⁷ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Army-making-targeted-kills-of-terrorists-in-JK-Manohar-Parrikar-says/articleshow/47378303.cms>

¹⁸ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/spy-funds-used-in-pil-against-army-chief/article1-939541.aspx>

Baloch militant groups.” These include the Balochistan Liberation Army, Baloch Republican Army and Balochistan Liberation Front. Although difficult to prove, yet intelligence agencies know these militant outfits as separatist groups acting on behalf of external forces and, according to them, “evidence reveals they have been found to be harbored at various places and training camps which have been administered by RAW since 2006.¹⁹ “

In January 2015, Pakistan’s Army Chief General Raheel Sharif also presented a dossier to top US officials during a visit to Washington detailing explicit evidence of Indian secret agencies’ involvement in inciting and supporting militancy in Pakistan’s troubled regions using Afghan soil.²⁰

Some critics even go to the extent of saying that Indian agencies have not only been exporting terrorism to Pakistan, they have also been training militants in the Tibet region from where they force them to cause instability in China;

an NGO allegedly established by RAW in Afghanistan’s northern Badakhshan province pursues the specific task of undermining Chinese interests through a variety of plans and waves of riots in Tibet.²¹ To counter China militarily, India also raised its new Mountain Strike Corps (MSC), which was geared towards acquiring quick-reaction ground offensive capabilities across the Line of Actual Control. Though, Mr. Parrikar has imposed a temporary freeze on the ongoing raising which started in January 2014, he has stated that the new corps are part of India’s overall military plan to counter China as well as to keep Pakistan off-balance.²²

The Indian reaction to the MoU on counter-terrorism cooperation that the intelligence agencies of Pakistan and Afghanistan signed on May 19 also underscored its displeasure; Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Raheel Sharif, and the Chief of the ISI had been discussing this with their Afghan counterparts since the deadly attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar on Dec 16 2014.

¹⁹ <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-6-321631-Lets-fight-terror-with-terrorism>

²⁰ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/828208/indias-role-in-militancy-pakistan-shares-dossier-with-us/>

²¹ <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-6-321631-Lets-fight-terror-with-terrorism>

²² <http://www.dawn.com/news/1183867/india-killing-terrorists-in-surgical-strikes-says-minister>

The accord, being the first of its kind, has been seen particularly by China as a useful underpinning for the security of their 'Belt and Road' projects in Pakistan. However, it caused a huge uproar within Afghanistan, India, the US and those close to former Afghan President Hamid Karzai.²³

In a bid to thwart the NDS-ISI deal, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval presented the MoU as being India-centric, alleging that Pakistan's aim behind this deal was to get an assurance as well as put pressure on Afghanistan that their territory will not be used for security related work by India. He went on to state that "this is based on a faulty assumption that India probably uses Afghan soil or Afghan nationals for its security purposes".²⁴ Interestingly, Ajit Doval, in his lecture at SASTRA University, as mentioned above, in February 2014, had named "defeating Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan" as one of India's strategic goals alongside "isolating Pakistan internationally" in its 'defensive offensive' strategies for Pakistan.²⁵ On the other hand, India itself has since 2002 provided Afghanistan with development aid, economic investment and also potential military assistance. Afghanistan also perceives India as an aid giver and has hoped for India, especially in connection to America's military drawdown from the country, to be a potential guarantor of Afghan stability while perceiving Pakistan as the spoiler. Today, India is one of the regional donors to Afghanistan and has provided around \$2 billion in aid since 2002.²⁶

On May 31, 2015, President Ghani reportedly also wrote a letter to Pakistan civil and military authorities, urging them to agree on an exchange of prisoners with Afghanistan. While Pakistan and Afghanistan currently have no formal extradition agreement, the two countries routinely ask each other to hand over wanted people. Chairman of National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs stated that if these wanted Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network insurgents are in

²³ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1182742>

²⁴ <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/19659-indias-national-security-advisor-criticizes-nds-isi-agreement?tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default>

²⁵ <http://playit.pk/watch?v=Ml44LwterWo>

²⁶ <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/pakistans-nightmare/#sthash.UYDbEEDL.dpuf>

Pakistan, they should be handed over to Kabul to help the reconciliation process. However, Laghari said he was not aware if any were in Pakistan's custody.²⁷

China, for one, gave fulsome praise to the NDS-ISI deal in a commentary in the Xinhua news agency and fully backed the deal as a significant contribution towards Afghan-Pakistan cooperation and ultimately regional security.²⁸ As for United States, while a working relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan in counter-terrorism was always encouraged, it was always kept under the wary eye of the US which would monitor and tailor it to its full advantage. With the NDS-ISI deal in place along with China's full backing, a Sino-Afghan-Pak entente in regional security would certainly be detrimental to U.S interests in the region. Pakistan has also indicated its willingness to cooperate with President Ghani, provided he is prepared to suspend Afghanistan's security tie-up with India. To be sure, anything involving ISI is always bound to draw the attention of other intelligence services in the region as well as beyond. A significant body of opinion within Afghanistan has also been critical of this tie-up due to their mistrust of ISI which has even brought together former President Hamid Karzai and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, who had been bitter enemies throughout the past decade since 2005, on the same page.²⁹

The statements made by the Indian Defence Minister along with Indian Prime Minister Modi's own statements in China and Bangladesh certainly expose and also confirm Narendra Modi's belligerent policies towards Pakistan. In response, Prime Minister Nawaz has asserted that Pakistan would defeat all designs of its enemies and establish itself as "a secure and affluent country no matter what the cost".³⁰

²⁷ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/895755/pakistan-should-handover-militants-to-kabul-in-bid-to-revive-peace-talks-senate-panel/>

²⁸ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/26/c_134272319.htm

²⁹ <http://atimes.com/2015/05/whos-afraid-of-afghan-ghanis-pakistan-pact/>

³⁰ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/894863/pm-nawaz-takes-aim-at-indian-leadership-vows-to-control-any-anti-pakistani-act/>

In the backdrop of the unfolding situation, clearly prospects of peace with India during the tenure of Narendra Modi seem little.³¹ Since 2001, the US has desperately tried to forge a strategic partnership between India and Pakistan in the name of bilateral cooperation in the war on terror in Afghanistan as well as counterterrorism efforts.³² Despite numerous efforts, while previous governments maintained a subtle stance, Modi-led government has even blatantly stressed that India would only maintain good ties with Pakistan if the latter compromises on Kashmir.³³ The Indian minister's statement to neutralize terrorism with terrorism is also not only irresponsible coming from an aspiring regional hegemon but exposes the Indian designs for the region. The world needs peace, progress and prosperity and the international powers need to play a positive role in this, the Minister for Information, Pervaiz Rashid, said.³⁴ Unfortunately, apart from the above geo-political vulnerabilities, Pakistan also suffers from a low conviction rate in its persistently inept Anti-Terrorism Courts created to combat terrorism; a negligent judiciary, an increase in the penetration of radical ideologies along with an array of other complex domestic challenges, mostly due to the reticence of the ruling elites.

Pakistan, as of now, is clearly caught up in a potentially deadly situation today. Its CPEC projects are also under the shadow of the regional power politics. The situation demands exceptional deft handling by the entire Pakistani leadership. If it doesn't rise above petty parochial politics, the "invisible enemy" could potentially jeopardize the Pak China economic cooperation as well as prop sects of reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Indian ministers have spoken their mind. So have their supporters in Afghanistan, leaving little doubt about their intent. While Pakistan needs to indiscriminately act against all shades of religious militants, it also needs national unity to fend off the challenges from the east and the west. Notwithstanding the obstacles

³¹ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/895755/pakistan-should-handover-militants-to-kabul-in-bid-to-revive-peace-talks-senate-panel/>

³² <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/16/pakistan-india-modi-lakhvi-obama-mumbai-attacks/>

³³ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1156539>

³⁴ *Khawaja Asif slams Indian minister's statement of 'sponsoring terrorism to counter terrorism'*

created by its external environment, Pakistan should fully welcome Chinese engagement with Pakistan and its lead role in Afghanistan. Such is also in convergence with US interests and would certainly contribute to regional peace and trade. Let's not encourage India as a regional bulwark against China. Mr. Modi should realize brinkmanship doesn't provide any space for even normal relationship.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in his official statements, has continually expressed his full commitment to fighting terrorism and extremism and the government of Pakistan is fully focused on developing the CPEC project which is believed to be not only significant for the prosperity of Pakistan but will possibly benefit the whole region.

Indian posturing Unifying Pakistan?

The Indian belligerence has clearly not only generated widespread anger within Pakistan; it has on the one hand unified the civilian-military leadership in condemning the posturing by Indian ministers. And, on the other, it has forced even the liberal Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), often ostracized by the right wing for its soft-on-India approach, to openly condemn the Indian posturing. Its co-chairperson, the de facto chief of the PPP, Asif Ali Zardari led the charge, followed by his deputy and leader of opposition in the National legislature, Khurseed Shah as well as Raza Rabbani, a former PPP stalwart and now the chairman of the Senate.

This outrage found its expression in a unanimous resolution that the Senate - the Upper House of Parliament – passed on June 11; it not only condemned the spate of recent provocative statements made by Indian leaders, including threats of “hot pursuit” into the Pakistani territory but also urged international community to take notice of what it said “does not bode well for regional peace.”

Posturing from inside India, and the vicious campaign against the ISI-NDS deal in Afghanistan, has certainly brought the triangle of tribulation i.e. Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to the brink of renewed tensions, threatening peace and reconciliation as a whole.

Not only is President Ghani facing a politically intimidating existential threat coming from the groups opposed to any détente with Pakistan; it has also restricted the space for those Pakistanis who have all these years advocated rapprochement with India. Prospects for resumption of Indo-Pakistan dialogue and the peace talks in Afghanistan are certainly not good – at least as of now.