

India-Pakistan: Lessons from the Peshawar attack – isolate all extremists

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It's humanly impossible not to be revolted by the killing of 134 innocent children in Peshawar by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and not to feel a surge of empathy with Pakistani citizens. This barbaric attack galvanised unprecedented solidarity demonstrations and vigils in South Asian cities.

The carnage even impelled Prime Minister Narendra Modi to suspend his hardline policy towards Islamabad—only temporarily, alas!—and call Mr Nawaz Sharif to declare that the attack was directed not just at Pakistan but against “all of humanity”, and offer him all possible assistance. This was a welcome move, much more positive than inviting Mr Sharif to his swearing-in in May.

Soon, however, New Delhi seemed to be slipping back into the old mould of hostility. First, it protested against the bail granted to Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, the alleged Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) “mastermind” of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Second, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval demanded that the post-Peshawar tough measures being taken against TTP be extended to LeT. And third, India refused to grant visas to 24 Pakistani delegates invited to a seminar by the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) in Delhi.

Now, Lakhvi was granted bail not by the Pakistan government, but by a court. In fact, the government said it would appeal against the order and has detained Lakhvi on other charges.

A similar legal process prevails in India, under which scores of people charged with or convicted of serious offences have been granted bail, including the Anand Margis who murdered LN Mishra 40 years ago, the 11 policemen charged with killing 40 Muslim youth in Meerut-Maliana in 1987, and more recently, Bharatiya Janata Party leaders Amit Shah and Maya Kodnani (sentenced to 28 years), not to speak of the Gujarat policemen named in the “encounter” killings of Ishrat Jahan and Sohrabuddin. The remedy against a bad bail order lies in legal appeal, not political condemnation.

LeT is of course a nasty terrorist group, whose head Hafiz Saeed absurdly blamed India for the Peshawar attack. But it's TTP that owned responsibility for it. The two groups cannot be equated at this juncture. By making an India-specific demand, Mr Doval has shown himself to be insensitive to the context. Such parochialism is unhelpful when India wants to appear empathetic.

Denial of visas for the December 19-21 (i.e., post-Peshawar) PIPFPD seminar on “Understanding Pakistan” was particularly deplorable. PIPFPD has played an excellent role over 20 years in promoting a citizen-to-citizen dialogue across the border—something that should be unhesitatingly encouraged in today's circumstances.

The Indian government's latest actions are a retrogression to the pre-Peshawar obstructionist policy it has followed especially under Mr Modi. Thus India-Pakistan foreign secretary-level talks were called off in August on the ground that Pakistan High Commissioner Abdul Basit didn't cancel his scheduled meeting with Kashmir's Hurriyat Conference leaders at New Delhi's instance. India suddenly took offence at what has become a routine over many years, and to which it didn't object even after the Mumbai attacks. Mr Basit was given just 20 minutes to choose!

In October, during the Maharashtra election campaign, Mr Modi used bellicose language chiding Pakistan as “the enemy” which has been taught a “befitting lesson” through retaliatory border firing. Home minister Rajnath Singh boastfully told Pakistan to stop ceasefire violations—because “the times have changed in India” with the BJP having won 282 seats.

In December, concerts by Pakistan’s highly-acclaimed Sachal Jazz Ensemble in Mumbai and Bangalore were cancelled. So were performances by two Pakistani sufi qawwals at the Press Club of India and the Foreign Correspondents’ Club—under official pressure. A delegation of Pakistani MPs visited Delhi, but didn’t get to meet Mr Modi or even Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan.

As for ceasefire violations, the Modi government would be deluding itself if it thinks it can prevent these through a military response which can deter Pakistan by threatening it with unaffordable costs. The existing strategic balance simply doesn’t permit such deterrence.

On the ground, both sides routinely violate the 2003 ceasefire agreement—Pakistan probably more frequently, to keep the Line of Control hot and “internationalise” the Kashmir issue—and blame each other for firing the first shot. They don’t follow elementary rules of warfare like the Geneva Conventions, as evidenced by the beheading of each other’s soldiers.

Given this, all solutions to India-Pakistan problems must necessarily be peaceful. These do work. An example is the Indus Waters Accord of 1960, which has by and large held, despite recent hiccups. By contrast, when left to military leaders, problems (e.g. Siachen or Sir Creek) become intractable. The Peshawar carnage has delivered a shock not just to Pakistan’s civil society but also to its “deep state, and created the ground for what could hopefully become a turning point in Pakistan’s policy towards terrorism, which has permitted jihadi terrorists to work in collusion with the army and its secret agencies and play havoc in the name of Islam. They target not just India, but various minority groups in Pakistan, including Shias, Ahmadis and Christians. Thus, Pakistan has recently witnessed several atrocities like the Lakki Marwat volleyball-field suicide-bombing in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (2010), the killing of hundreds of Shias in Balochistan and Punjab (2008-12), the Peshawar church attack (2013), and the murder of scores of polio workers. Pakistan’s rulers have learnt no lessons from these or from the facts emerging from the killing of Osama bin Laden, who had been hiding on Pakistani soil, probably with the knowledge of the military. They continue to shield jihadi groups that kill innocents but pose no immediate threat to the Pakistani state—with disastrous consequences. The latest example is the government’s failure to seek an extension of the detention of Malik Ishaq, the chief of the banned Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, involved in numerous anti-Shia pogroms and the 2009 assault on the Sri Lankan cricket team. (He has since been detained under another law.) However, there are two differences between Peshawar and other recent terrorist attacks. Peshawar’s victims were primarily children of army personnel who attended the Army Public School. Secondly, the attack came in the midst of a strong anti-TTP military campaign. Both could strengthen the army’s will to fight the Taliban.

Hopeful signs are emerging, like the 20-point anti-terrorist plan. Islamabad has, for the first time ever, repudiated the spurious distinction between the “good Taliban” and the “bad Taliban”. After the Peshawar attack, army chief Raheel Sharif visited Kabul to demand the extradition of TTP’s Mullah Fazlullah. The government has lifted the moratorium on executions, and hanged several convicts. But a primarily military, “kill-them-all”, response won’t do. Vacillations, as in the Ishaq case, will damage the anti-extremist cause.

There must be a resolute campaign to break the nexus between the Pakistani state and Islamic extremists, used selectively against Indian targets, which has created the frightening jihadi apparatus that’s now consuming Pakistani society. This campaign must be based on an analysis of the root-causes of the culture of extremism, and lead to a radical transformation of public discourse.

This means acknowledging, to start with, that the Peshawar killers aren't "outsiders" or "misguided" people—any more than the Hindutva goons who want to terrorise and kill non-Hindus in India. Both are equally fanatical and equally dangerous. Like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban too has a clear agenda—to transform Pakistan into an Islamist state that practises Sharia law, where pluralism and tolerance have no place. This agenda must be firmly opposed, without ifs and buts.

India can contribute positively to de-Talibanisation if it resumes the bilateral dialogue with Pakistan and talks to and cultivates its pro-peace constituency, which New Delhi has never done because it equates Pakistani society with the state, and considers both implacably anti-Indian.

In reality, Pakistan has a fairly strong civil society with many liberal and tolerant voices, which uncompromisingly oppose the Islamist ideology and stand for a modern, tolerant, pluralist and democratic state. Such views also find expression in some state institutions, universities and the media. India must engage with them.

This entails rejecting the gratuitous advice from some "realist" (read, cynical) quarters that India should directly talk to the Pakistan military, just as the United States does (revealed by Gen Sharif's two-weeks-long recent visit there). India's government is a civilian entity and must deal exclusively with and strengthen Pakistan's civilian leadership and its peace constituency.

Peshawar has created a unique moment in Pakistan, when de-Talibanisation can be put on the agenda. India can make this a unique moment for all of South Asia by reaching out to Pakistan with earnest proposals for cooperation—in fighting terrorism, promoting trade, and stabilising Afghanistan. This moment presents a valuable opportunity for peace in the region.

If the Modi government is not to squander it, it must stop regarding Pakistan as an enemy to be vanquished, but see it as a potentially friendly neighbour. Above all, it must crack the whip on and isolate Hindutva extremists. Or, India's post-Peshawar intervention will have no credibility.

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P.S.

[*http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/12/30/Lessons-From-The-Peshawar-Attack%3A-Isolate-all-extremists](http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/12/30/Lessons-From-The-Peshawar-Attack%3A-Isolate-all-extremists)