**The Persian Puzzle**

**Pakistan’s reciprocal attack pushed the situation into a stalemate.**

[Dr. Rizwan Zeb](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-rizwan-zeb)

January 30, 2024

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns), [Newspaper](https://www.nation.com.pk/newspaper)

From escalation to de-escala­tion and mutually agreeing to work together to address issues of concern, Iran and Pakistan swiftly covered the entire crisis cycle within a few days. While Ira­nian strikes raised questions about the decision-making mechanism in Tehran and the presence of competing power centers, Pakistan act­ed maturely and as a respon­sible state throughout this pe­riod. It signaled that, despite facing several unprecedented internal and external challenges, it is fully capable, ready, and willing to safeguard and, if need be, defend its territorial integri­ty and sovereignty.

On January 16, 2024, Iran target­ed what it claimed were Jaish-al-Adil camps in Panjgur, Balochistan, re­sulting in the tragic death of two chil­dren. Reacting to this sudden and un­provoked attack, Islamabad stated that this attack was not only a breach of Pakistan’s sovereignty but also an “egregious violation of internation­al law and the spirit of bilateral rela­tions” between Pakistan and Iran. It also downgraded its diplomatic rela­tions with Tehran by recalling its am­bassador and expelling the Iranian en­voy in Islamabad. On January 18, 2024, Pakistan in an intelligence-based oper­ation, Marg Bar Sarmachar, undertook a series of “highly coordinated and specifically targeted precision military strikes” against the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) camps at seven locations inside Iran. In an official statement post-operation, it was stated: “The precision strikes were carried out us­ing killer drones, rockets, loitering mu­nitions, and stand-off weapons. Maxi­mum care was taken to avoid collateral damage.” Iranian official sources later confirmed that all dead in these strikes were non-Iranian nationals.

[Nawaz will become PM if PTI supporters wasted votes on independents: Bilawal](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2024/nawaz-will-become-pm-if-pti-supporters-wasted-votes-on-independents-bilawal)

Pakistan’s reciprocal attack pushed the situation into a stalemate. Now Iran was faced with a dilemma: climb a rung on the escalation ladder and conduct another attack or utilize the peace signal that Islamabad sent and move towards normalization. The fact that Iran accepted that those who were killed in the Pakistani strike were non-Iranian nationals further complicated the situation. However, better sense prevailed, and soon both countries decided to deescalate. According to a joint statement simultaneously issued by Tehran and Islamabad, the foreign ministers of Iran, Hossein Amir Ab­dollahian, and Pakistan, Jalil Abbas Jilani, had a telephonic conversation in which they agreed to restore their diplomatic relations and the ambassa­dors resumed their duties on 26 Janu­ary 2024. Iranian Foreign Minister Ab­dollahian would be visiting Pakistan on 29 January 2024.

The biggest unsolved puzzle is the is­sue of the timing of the Iranian strikes. Just a day before the strikes, Pakistan and Iranian Navies conducted a joint exercise in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf, and it happened only after a few hours of a meeting between Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, Pakistan’s caretaker prime minister, and Hossein Amir Ab­dollahian, the Iranian foreign minister. All this was happening in the backdrop of improved relations between the two countries where a number of projects were identified and implemented and several new were under consideration. The second puzzle is who decided to at­tack and why? A conclusive solution to this puzzle might not be available any time soon. However, in keeping with the fact that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) vowed for revenge after multiple terror attacks coupled with internal political strife, forthcoming national elections, and an urge to dem­onstrate to the USA, the West, and Isra­el of its military capability to conduct such an attack could be identified as possible motivations. The third puzzle is, as per the Iranian strategic analysis, what sort of Pakistani response was anticipated? Pakistan is not a hostile country, and several modes of commu­nication were available to address any such matter. Again, looking at the end, ways and means principle, one cannot make sense of it. India was quick to re­act to the attack and supported the Ira­nian strikes on alleged terror camps in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs in a statement declared it an act of self-defense. No such statement or reaction was issued on the other Iranian strikes in Iraq and Syria. How was this to be viewed in Islamabad? The Fourth puz­zle is what was the outcome of a SWOT and/or the cost-benefit analysis be­tween what would be achieved through such an action versus what would be at stake or lost? Although the unneces­sary crisis initiated by Iran with Pak­istan was short-lived and ended posi­tively for both countries yet there are several issues on which all parties would continue to ponder and debate. However, Pakistan throughout this pe­riod acted maturely and as a responsi­ble state. One thing that clearly came out of this crisis is that despite the fact that Pakistan is undergoing a compli­cated phase of its history where it is facing several unprecedented internal and external challenges, it is fully capa­ble, ready and willing to safeguard and if need be defend its territorial integri­ty and sovereignty.

[Voters to decide fate of Pakistan on Feb 8: Shehbaz](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2024/voters-to-decide-fate-of-pakistan-on-feb-8-shehbaz)

The most positive point is that both countries demonstrated a desire for ending the hostility and establish peace. This trend should continue and both countries should address issues of concern by working together. To use Oscar Wilde’s dictum with a little tem­pering: to attack (Pakistan) once, may be regarded as a misfortune, but to do it again would look like carelessness. What is positive is that both Tehran and Islamabad has decided to tread the path of peacemaking carefully.

**Dr. Rizwan Zeb**
The writer is a Karachi based Security Analyst.