**Navigating a negative neighbourhood**

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Monday, Jun 17, 2024

Pakistan has maintained a friendly and cooperative policy towards South Asian states due to its peaceful coexistence policy. Pakistan has generally aimed for a peaceful neighbourhood and as well as peace within the region to improve the living standards of the South Asian people and establish stable, diplomatic, economic and people-to-people relations.

However, the postures adopted by our eastern and western neighbours show that neither New Delhi nor Kabul aspires to cooperate with Islamabad for regional peace and stability. Rather their actions continue to demonstrate their intent to harm Pakistan and its national security.

Under its policy of peaceful coexistence, Islamabad has made numerous assertions to initiate a dialogue to resolve outstanding disputes with India. However, New Delhi’s stance towards Pakistan has been severe and inflexible. India has repeatedly associated Pakistan with alleged cross-border terrorism while itself continuing to carry out extraterritorial and extrajudicial killings within Pakistan.

New Delhi has also tried to isolate Pakistan while harming it on international platforms such as the FATF. In May last year, when the Pakistani foreign minister visited India after 13 years for the SCO summit, the then Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar could not hold back his harsh words about treating the Pakistani FM as a representative of the terror industry. This was reflective of the lack of desire on the part of India to accommodate Pakistan.

The belligerence towards Pakistan continued during the 18th Lok Sabha election campaign in India. One had thought that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had scratched its itch of targeting Pakistan in the 2019 elections. However, it had to resort to projecting Pakistan as an adversary to galvanize its dropping voter base. Even if the anti-Pakistan rhetoric was solely for electioneering, derogatory terms for a neighbouring country do not suit any leaders.

The faint hopes that the new governments in Islamabad and New Delhi would bring a fresh perspective to India-Pakistan relations and improve bilateral ties are now therefore even dimmer. Repeated threats by Indian leaders of physically taking over Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan and suggestions of exchanging Indian Illegally Occupied Kashmir (IIOJK) for Kartarpur indicate diversion tactics. This suggests that, despite the remote chances of that happening, if the new government in New Delhi offers an olive branch it would likely have a contrary underlying intent with a short shelf life.

This is why Islamabad must practise strategic patience and not be swayed if New Delhi suggests dialogue, especially on resolving the Kashmir dispute since that would likely be deceptive. Many analysts suggest that the two countries should resume dialogue and even trade for a peaceful region. However, unfortunately India’s tendency to harm Pakistan leaves little leeway for the two countries to cooperate for a peaceful neighbourhood. The situation rather demands that Islamabad take a firm stance regarding India as long as the latter’s intentions of hurting Pakistan persist. A peaceful neighbourhood is only possible with mutually constructive intentions of working towards a peaceful region.

The situation is similar when it comes to Pakistan’s western neighbor, Afghanistan, which continues to challenge Pakistan’s national security. Pakistan has hosted over four million refugees from Afghanistan for over four decades. After the US and Nato forces took boots off the ground in August 2021, Pakistan actively advocated for international recognition of the Taliban government. Along with China, Pakistan offered Afghanistan connectivity with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Gwadar Port. However, these measures have only been reciprocated with postures that show that the interim Taliban regime does not wish to work with Pakistan for regional peace and stability.

Afghanistan has consistently overlooked Pakistan’s contributions for the Afghans and has rather worked in support of proving safe havens to terror groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan has on several instances sought the cooperation of the Afghan government to address the matter of rising terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, which the Afghan Taliban committed to curb during the Doha Dialogue. However, the Afghan regime, despite proximity to Afghan-based terrorist groups, has not been able to curtail their offensive actions in Pakistan. Kabul continues to use these groups as a bargaining chip. This shows reluctance on behalf of the Taliban regime to cooperate with Pakistan.

Even after the surge of terrorism in Pakistan emanating from Afghanistan, Pakistan kept the border with Afghanistan mainly open. However, the failure of the interim Taliban regime to curtail the infiltration of terror groups pushed Pakistan to take strict measures such as closing borders and deporting illegal migrants. Afghanistan’s policy towards Pakistan is harming its own people, as the traders on Afghanistan’s side suffer more. Likewise, patients, students, family members and others cannot cross the border for their basic needs that Pakistan has always facilitated.

While Pakistan has consistently tried to maintain cooperative relationships with both Kabul and New Delhi, the two countries have consistently shown their unwillingness to cooperate with Pakistan. In fact, there has been work towards destabilizing Pakistan through various means and tools including but not limited to financing, supporting and training proxies to carry out terrorist activities in Pakistan.

This demands Pakistan take a strict and firm stance towards any states wishing to cause it harm. While Pakistan must welcome ample arenas of cooperation in areas of socio-economic development and regional connectivity between East and West Asia and Central Asia, it must not overlook or stand any malicious attempt to malign or destabilize Pakistan internally or internationally.

The circumstances that these neighbours have created for Pakistan are harmful to its internal peace and stability as well as regional peace and stability. Islamabad must convey its intention to protect its nation from both non-traditional and traditional security threats from these states and their proxies.

Likewise, Islamabad must forward the assurance of delivering an immediate, precise and effective response when any of the states goes out of their way or is on the track to harm or damage Pakistan. A peaceful neighbourhood requires collective effort and good intentions and is not Pakistan’s responsibility solely.

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