

India versus Pakistan in the court of global opinion

Islamabad may get credit for pilot's return but New Delhi is way ahead in PR battle

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A Pakistani soldier stands guard near the wreckage of an Indian plane shot down by the Pakistan military in Hurrán, near the Line of Control in Pakistani Kashmir, pictured on Feb. 28. © AP

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's speedy return of the Indian air force pilot captured in the latest violent flare-up between the two countries gives Islamabad a rare public relations win in its decades-long conflict with New Delhi.

Even if the move Friday was forced on Pakistan through diplomatic pressure from the U.S., Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, it looks good on television -- a key consideration in the court of global opinion.

For this conflict is not only a dispute over the territory of Kashmir, a clash of nationalistic wills and a military fight but also a contest for the international community's sympathies.

Running parallel to the aerial skirmishes, bombings and claims of violations by the two sides are diplomatic campaigns by New Delhi and Islamabad to turn opinion in their favor.

Even if Islamabad can profit from the return of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, whose fighter aircraft was shot down in action two days earlier, India has far more aces in the PR game. New Delhi enjoys higher overall standing as a more democratic power and vibrant rising economy. Also, its narrative that jihadist extremism emanating from Pakistan is a threat to international order has resonance in a world fearful of Islamist terrorism.

The Feb. 14 suicide bombing which killed 40 Indian security personnel in Pulwama in Indian-administered Kashmir triggered widespread condemnation, including from permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. India's Ministry of External Affairs publicized these messages to build pressure on Pakistan for sponsoring banned terrorist groups including Jaish-e-Muhammad, which claimed responsibility for Pulwama.



Security forces examine the damaged vehicles after an explosion at Lethpora on the Jammu-Srinagar highway, on Feb. 14 in Srinagar, India. © Hindustan Times/Getty Images

New Delhi capitalized on the momentum to push through a unanimous Security Council resolution on Feb. 21 condemning Jaish for a "heinous and cowardly suicide bombing," and calling for "perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts" to be held accountable.

Pakistan attempted to obstruct this resolution by lobbying its all-weather ally China and top U.N. officials. But even Beijing bowed to the overwhelming Security Council consensus and voted for the resolution.

After Pulwama, India revived its oft-stalled diplomatic mission to get the Jaish's mastermind, Maulana Masood Azhar proscribed by the U.N. Azhar has, with his armed attacks on Indian territory, been a vital proxy of the Pakistani military for years and proscribing him would amount to embarrassing Islamabad.

On Feb. 27, the U.S., the U.K. and France proposed designating Azhar a global terrorist and thereby forcing Pakistan to clamp down on his jihadist operations. On four previous occasions, China had stood by Pakistan at the U.N. and deployed technical arguments to stymie this effort.

India sees China as the sole major barrier to its effort to isolate Pakistan. The China-Pakistan axis has existed for several decades to check India's influence. In the past few years, the \$62 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has tightened links. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally sought Chinese President Xi Jinping's cooperation to censure Pakistan for its sponsoring terrorism, but Beijing has not obliged beyond generic platitudes.

Modi's main foreign policy challenge is to convince Xi to shed Chinese strategic concerns about India's rise and get China on board to pressure Pakistan on terrorism.

The rare instance where China did move against Pakistan at an international forum was in February 2018, when it agreed to place its ally on a "gray list" for financing terrorism under the aegis of the international Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Beijing then worried it could "lose face" by backing Pakistan, which all other FATF members believed to be guilty of allowing jihadist outfits to raise funds. The lesson of that episode is clear. India can get China to squeeze Pakistan on terrorism, but only if there is sufficient overall international pressure and if China gets something in return.

Apart from China, the only countries to take Pakistan's side are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a grouping of 57 Muslim-majority nations. On Feb. 26, when Indian Air Force jets penetrated deep inside Pakistan and claimed to have bombed Jaish terrorist training camps, Islamabad trumpeted that the OIC "condemned the Indian incursion and aerial violation" against Pakistan, which is one of its founding members.

But India has worked behind the scenes to weaken the OIC's support for Pakistan. New Delhi finagled an invitation as "guest of honor" to the OIC foreign ministers' conclave in Abu Dhabi on March 1 and 2, prompting Pakistan to boycott the meeting. India is highlighting its large population of 185 million Muslim citizens, seeking to dispel Pakistan's arguments that Muslims are oppressed in Hindu-majority India.

New Delhi is also leveraging its appeal to foreign investors to win over wealthy Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia, the Crown Prince of which visited India after the Pulwama attack and committed \$100 billion in investment. This compares with \$20 billion he promised Pakistan. He also applauded India for countering terrorism, although without naming Pakistan.

Elsewhere, India has a comfortable advantage over Pakistan. Many nations view India as a vibrant democracy where political rights are more advanced than military-dominated Pakistan. Countries such as France and the U.S., which experienced jihadist terror, have staunchly defended India's right to retaliate against Pakistan after Pulwama.

It is fair to say that most U.N. member states have applauded or quietly approved India's proportionate and precise response to Pulwama -- with the standard caveat that they hope India and Pakistan can avoid full-scale war and find a negotiated settlement.

There is worldwide abhorrence of the jihadist fundamentalism of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State group (ISIS) and other hard-line outfits operating from Pakistan. So, India has found it easier to convince the world that terror, rather than self-determination for Kashmir or human rights, is the main problem.

India has moved the argument away from the old view that "one country's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" -- a notion which used to complicate

its case against Pakistan. Today, the most widely accepted international cliché is "no cause justifies terrorism."

India can use this new environment to drive home its diplomatic lead. Even when the current military face-off with Pakistan de-escalates, India is in a position to keep pushing for diplomatic isolation as it strives for permanent deterrence against the cross-border terrorist scourge. Returning a single pilot may allow Islamabad a temporary PR victory. But overall it is New Delhi that is winning.



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