How India has successfully avoided falling for Pakistani overtures

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The letter from Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi proposing a resumption of the stalled bilateral dialogue process was a trial balloon doomed to fail from the outset.

The Indian government took six days before making the letter (dated September 14) public, reflecting how wary New Delhi is of getting entangled in another vain peace effort when Islamabad has hardly allayed India’s serious security concerns. A brutal reminder that nothing has changed came on September 21 in the form of inhumane killings of three policemen in Jammu & Kashmir’s Shopian district by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen.

An exasperated New Delhi sees no point in investing time and energy in cosmetic reconciliation with such a double-dealing state. Hence India’s condemnation of Pakistan’s “evil agenda” and Imran’s “true face”, and its cancellation of a ministerial meeting scheduled in New York for late September. The meeting was called off within one day of the announcement, revealing how low Pakistan’s credibility has sunk in Indian eyes.

Notwithstanding Imran’s statement that he is “ready to discuss terrorism” with Modi, India wants concrete action instead of misleading talk on this sensitive matter.

Cross-border infiltration bids by jihadists from Pakistan continue and civilian casualties in Kashmir from terrorist violence have been the highest in 2017, compared with the previous four years.

Moreover, the legacy issues of lack of justice for Pakistani terrorist masterminds of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai and the absence of accountability for the 2016 Pathankot and Uri attacks have piled up into a collective cynicism in India that talking to Pakistan is equivalent to dignifying an incorrigible terrorist state.

Modi’s expression of interest in bettering relations with Pakistan has stressed “constructive engagement”, a phrase that Imran is now rehashing. But thus far, India has experienced only destructive engagement from Pakistan’s military-intelligence complex. In such a backdrop, Imran’s overambitious vision of a SAARC summit in Islamabad which Modi would grace sounds disingenuous and preposterous.

Apart from the mismatch between Pakistan’s words and deeds, India doubts the motive behind Imran’s missive to Modi. According to The New York Times, the Pakistani Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa had “quietly reached out to India” to resume peace talks months before Imran’s military-orchestrated election victory with the goal of mitigating intense international pressure that Islamabad has been facing for its nefarious behaviour.
Cleaning up its image by extending an olive branch to India, and then using this “moderate” diplomatic turn to ease the harsh American cutoff of military aid and receive a $12 billion economic bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), are the unstated objectives guiding Pakistan’s rhetorical eagerness for peace.

Pakistan is in desperate economic straits and the military appears to be goading Imran to opportunistically play nice as a responsible actor before the international community out of duress rather than any liberal transformation in its foreign policy.

Long-time watchers of the subcontinent can recall several earlier instances where the hidden “foreign hand” either directly or indirectly pushed Pakistan into rapprochement or compromise with India.

Such externally induced openings ultimately collapsed under the weight of internal contradictions in Pakistan and the violent ground realities at the border. Boston University’s Jessica Stern has documented a widespread “jihad culture” in Pakistan. It is connected to the inbuilt Pakistani nationalist narrative that Kashmir must be freed from Indian “occupation” through a multi-faceted “freedom struggle”, leaving little room for sustainable peace with India.

Routine invocations at international forums of India’s alleged human rights abuses in Kashmir by Pakistani officials are deeply internalised into their ideational system.

Such verbal provocations worsen relations with India, but they rarely cease since abandoning the “Kashmir cause” is unthinkable for the body politic of Pakistan.

Compounding these obstacles is the extreme imbalance in civil-military relations in Pakistan which is symbolised by Imran’s rise as Prime Minister.

In 2015, when Modi flew to Lahore and embraced then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, there was a sense in New Delhi that Sharif genuinely wanted to break free from old mindsets and wished to set aside Kashmir to improve commercial and people-to-people links.

Sharif’s ensuing political downfall and legal persecution were understood in New Delhi to be the handiwork of a Pakistani “deep state” that fears peace with India.

With Imran, who is beholden to the military and is seen to be taking instructions from his Army Chief in composing messages to Modi, India has a personal credibility barrier.

Whether or not Imran promises anything to India, leave alone delivering on it, depends on the whims of the Pakistani military — an institution which remains unreformed, unapologetic and perpetually geared up to protect Pakistan from “Indian hegemony”.

Without a fundamental overhaul of Pakistan’s state apparatus, India does not foresee big shifts in bilateral ties toward a lasting settlement.

The national mood in India is firmly against believing Pakistan at face value. With general elections approaching, Modi is cognisant of this public sentiment and cagey about entering yet another round of diplomacy with a neighbour whose purpose is hollow and whose essential makeup is unchanged.

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