

We need a more robust Pak foreign policy



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

I have great personal respect for Sushma Swaraj. She is, by far, one of the most competent ministers in the current Cabinet. It is for this reason that I am at a loss to understand what is happening with regard to our policy towards Pakistan.

It is abundantly clear to anyone remotely in the know that Pakistan is quite clear about how to deal with India. Pakistan's policy is, as I have said on countless occasions, one of explosive aggression followed by tactical appeasement. This policy has undergone no change with Imran Khan becoming the PM of Pakistan. In fact, any civilian PM of Pakistan is a puppet of the deep state consisting of the ISI and the Pakistani Army. PMs may come and go, but the policy of the deep state remains unchanged, and the incumbent civilian, who is ostensibly "democratically" elected, has no option but to follow this policy.

This situation explains why Mr Khan, on assuming power, held out an olive branch to India, while Pakistan relentlessly continued its support and sponsorship of terrorism against India. Ceasefire violations have escalated; the Pakistani Army has upped its shelling from across the border, killing and displacing civilians; terrorists sponsored by Pakistan have claimed with impunity the lives of our brave armed forces and paramilitary personnel. Aggression, followed by appeasement, has been the consistent policy.

What has been our response? I am afraid, we have neither been consistent, nor prepared, nor armed with a strategic response of our own. On the one hand, we have publicly main-

tained, for some time now, that there can be no talks with Pakistan in the shadow of terrorism. Formal comprehensive talks were suspended by the previous UPA government precisely for this reason. Even though PM Narendra Modi invited former Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif for his swearing-in ceremony, and later air-dashed to Lahore to give a hug to Mr Sharif on his birthday, these talks were not resumed, because Pakistan's transparent nexus with terrorism directed against India not only continued, but escalated, with such brazen attacks as that of Uri and Pathankot.

While not agreeing to the resumption of the composite dialogue process, we have, in addition, made countless statements that no talks with Pakistan will be our policy so long as it does not end its verifiable nexus with terrorism. Ms Swaraj herself said that until the perpetrators of the Mumbai carnage are brought to book, any talks with Pakistan are out of the question. But, just a few weeks after her statement, PM Modi met with his counterpart, Mr Sharif, on the sidelines of the Ufa summit, and issued a rather ambivalent and questionable joint statement after that.

Mr Khan's offer of talks with India was something we should have expected, and been prepared for. In fact, even better, we should have proactively pre-empted Pakistan's move by becoming the prime mover ourselves. Immediately after his election, we should have issued a formal statement expressing the hope that the new PM of Pakistan will eschew the path of terrorism, so that the comprehensive dialogue process can be renewed, with terrorism as the fir-

st item on the agenda. Then the ball would have been in Pakistan's court. It would have to respond, and we could manoeuvre the response trajectory.

However, since we were not proactive, the opposite has happened. Pakistan has made the offer of talks, and we are scurrying around to respond. And, our response has been — to say the least — rather egregious. First, we said that the two foreign ministers will meet on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York. Then we clarified that this will be a meeting, not a dialogue. What is the difference between the two? When two people meet, at the level of foreign ministers, what they say to each other — unless they are on "maun vraf", a vow of silence — constitutes a dialogue. Such a dialogue may not be at the level of the structured comprehensive dialogue, but it is a dialogue. Hair splitting on what is a "talk" and what is a "dialogue" is, frankly, quite silly.

But more egg on our face was to follow. The very next day the MEA said that this meeting has been cancelled. The reason given for this reversal was the killing of our security personnel by Pakistan-based entities, and the release of postage stamps of Pakistan-glorifying militant Burhan Wani, who was killed in an encounter by our security forces. The MEA spokesperson said "the evil agenda of Pakistan stands exposed, and the true face of the new Pakistan PM, Imran Khan, has been revealed to the world".

This is truly mystifying. Were "Pakistan-

based entities" not killing our security personnel when we agreed, just 24 hours earlier, for Ms Swaraj to meet with her Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mehmood Qureshi? Were, we in any doubt that Burhan Wani was a terrorist trained and supported by Pakistan, for us to suddenly realise, in the space of 24 hours, that a stamp issued in his name by Pakistan showed the "true face of the Pakistan PM"?

The truth is that our response was a plain and simple flip-flop, whose underlying cause is the transparent absence of a well-thought out strategic policy to deal with our hostile neighbour. In the absence of such a policy, our responses become ad hoc. We appear as diplomatic dilettantes on the international stage, and the advantage, quite unnecessarily, accrues to Pakistan. In this instance, while we were busy explaining the reasons for the abrupt reversal of our decisions, Pakistan has conveyed to the world that India has spurned its offer for talks. Mr Qureshi said as much: "It is unfortunate that India has not given a positive response. India has once again wasted an opportunity for peace."

Diplomacy to be effective must be embedded in a strategic matrix. The question is not whether we should talk to Pakistan or not. The real issue is that whatever we do must be in accordance with a well-calibrated strategic policy. There is no point in diverting attention from this basic issue by planning the celebration of anniversaries of the surgical strike. That was a move we welcomed and paid tribute to our brave soldiers. However, one strike alone is not enough to overlook the continued violence against us from across the border. Nor is a muscular posture a substitute for strategic clarity.

The writer, an author and former diplomat, is a member of the JD(U).

The views expressed are personal.

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