

INDO-PAK DIPLOMATIC SQUABBLES

BY

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Till recently Indo-Pak diplomatic squabbles were confined to multiple international forums, including the UN and its agencies. It even involved ministers of both countries on the General Assembly (UNGA) platform. One nation rose to blame the other for their poor record of human rights, the other retaliated accusing the first of even worse performance. There has never been an occasion when one has commented and the other has not claimed the legal right to reply. In the last UNGA meeting, Pak was lambasted by India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, forcing Pak to claim the right to reply in each case.

The same continues in every international forum. India perpetually raises Pak's policy of good versus bad terrorism and has its terror groups even listed in joint declarations. Pak on the other hand continuously raises the Kashmir bogey as a cause of all ills. It has attempted to connect Kashmir with peace in Afghanistan, which has had no takers. Kashmir therefore remains a flashpoint.

Diplomatic relations hit a low when India convinced nations in the region to formally boycott the SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad in 2016, solely due to Pak's support to terror outfits. This declared SAARC as all but dead weight for the region. The recent joint communique issued post the visit to Nepal by the Pak PM, stating revival of the SARRC and support for holding the cancelled summit in Islamabad is an indicator of Pak's desperation to regain lost ground.

With a tense LoC with regular breaches of ceasefire and on occasions even the employment of heavy weapons with increasing civilian casualties not being enough, there is now a new diplomatic row, with both nations accusing the other of harassment of its diplomatic staff. Pak even

went to the extreme of calling their envoy back for discussions on the subject.

This Pak action does not imply permanent withdrawal of their High Commissioner or downgrading of relations but seeks to raise the stakes of growing tensions. Attempting to add pressure on India it announced that its High Commissioner would not return till harassment stops. To further seeking to blame India, it cancelled the visit of its commerce secretary for the WTO conference this month. India has yet to announce a tit for tat measure, other than criticizing Pak's actions.

Between the two nations, harassing of respective consulate staff has been the norm. While India entered the game recently, on the Pak side, it has always been an ongoing process. The Indian High Commissioner has been denied permission to attend events, at times even blocked midway to the same, despite him having been invited and the visit confirmed. Indian staff have been picked up by Pak intelligence agencies and harassed on multiple occasions. Construction work in the Indian Consulate has been stopped and workers questioned and harassed. Indian government websites have been banned and blocked preventing the local Pakistani from applying for an Indian visa online.

India had been lax in retaliation. The Indian media has always given the Pak High Commissioner over importance. Their previous High Commissioner, Abdul Basit, had more coverage on Indian media than most Indian cabinet ministers. He was invited to multiple forums and even interviewed on talks shows, where he continued to rant by blaming India for all ills, espousing support for Kashmir in general and the Hurriyat in particular. His comments increased during the period preceding his departure. Never in Pak media has the Indian High Commissioner ever been given even near similar importance.

Tailing and harassing diplomats on both sides has been the norm between the two nations, with some members being suspected to represent spy agencies. Pak diplomats are accused of being involved in Hawala

activities to fund Kashmiri separatists, a fact accepted by Hurriyat ring leaders now behind bars. A few have also been arrested while attempting to interact with their local spies.

In 2003, India accused the Pak deputy High Commissioner, Jaleel Abbas Gilani, with the alleged funding of separatists, but he could not be charged due to diplomatic immunity. In a charge sheet filed in Jan this year, the NIA stated that senior Pakistani embassy officials provided money to Kashmiri separatists to foment trouble in the valley. Pak has simultaneously claimed that Indian diplomats have also been similarly involved and on occasions sought their expulsion.

In Dec last year, Pak officials attempted to honey trap three officials of the Indian embassy in Islamabad. The officials became aware and reported the issue. They were later withdrawn from Islamabad. In 2010, an Indian second secretary in Islamabad's High Commission press division, fell in love with a Pak ISI official and passed on classified information on India's developmental work in Afghanistan. She was subsequently recalled back to India.

In Oct 2016, Indian security agencies arrested a Pak embassy staffer, Mehmood Akhtar, outside the gates of the Delhi Zoo, for running a spy ring and luring serving armed forces personnel using money and honey traps. He even possessed a fake aadhaar card with a Chandini Chowk address. He was declared 'persona nongrata' and asked to leave. The agencies claimed ten other staffers were also involved, but since had not been caught red handed, no action was taken.

In every case Pak retaliated and ordered Indian diplomats to leave, claiming they were also spying. In case Pak took the first step, India retaliated. In 1997, Pak removed two Indians and India retaliated by ordering two Pak staffers to leave. Both nations initially agreed to keep the matter silent, till it was broken on Pak media. India responded similarly.

This is the first time Pak has decided to make the issue public by recalling its High Commissioner for consultations. Its present High Commissioner, Sohail Mahmood, stated prior to his departure that positive actions undertaken by Pak in recent months, including permitting relatives of Kulbhushan Jadhav to meet him have been brought to naught by Indian actions. However, Pak failed to mention similar actions by their agencies on Indian diplomats. The Indian government recently issued an advisory to its staff in Islamabad, to only leave the diplomatic area in emergencies. Even after the recall of the Pak High Commissioner, unsavoury actions on Indian diplomats continue in Islamabad. India in the last three months has issued 12 demarches to Pak on harassment of its staff in Islamabad.

The Pak government has stated that it seeks to support their diplomats in India. This is contrary to actions on their soil, as the ISI, the prime agency responsible for harassing Indian diplomats does not come under the purview of the Pak government, but their deep state. Thus, while their PM may blame Indian security agencies, but would be unable to control his own ISI. Thus, nothing is likely to change in the coming months.

Meanwhile Pak remains under US pressure to recommence dialogue with India by indicating positive steps to satisfy India's demands for stopping flow of terrorists and funds for terrorism into Kashmir. By making the present diplomatic spat public, Pak seeks to place the blame on India for not creating a conducive environment for progressing talks. It may find few takers for its actions.

The Indian government should ignore Pak's ranting on the subject. Unless Pak changes its attitude towards Indian diplomats, India should not yield under pressure. It should remember that it is Pak which faces international pressures, not India. Pak is expected to create the right environment for India to take a step forward, not India.

India should not seek to link diplomatic actions with pressure along the LoC. It should rather watch and wait, without retaliating in kind. A hurried counter action by

India may prove counter-productive. Ultimately, Pak would need to take a step back and return their High Commissioner despite Indian silence. Keeping him in Islamabad for a prolonged duration is to their disadvantage, as a vital link between the two nations is missing.

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