
When India and Pakistan start wrestling again

The incursion of the Indian Air Force into Pakistan, and its attack on a Jaish e Mohammed training facility in Balakot on 26 February, was a surprise, but not a shock. The death of 40 of its soldiers in the JeM suicide bombing at Pulwama was so substantive that mere diplomatic protest was never going to satisfy New Delhi. Going forward, in attacking a jihadist camp within Pakistan, without significant diplomatic fall-out, India has established an important red-line in the region.

Assessing events from a British perspective, the latest wrestling bout between these two rivals appears now to have entered a lull. Despite an eager online presence projecting its views to the world, Pakistan's initial momentum following the dog-fight over Kashmir between the respective Air Forces, was soon lost. Whilst downing an Indian jet and capturing its pilot played well domestically, social media images of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman being beaten by an irate mob was a poor look internationally. It is a reminder that in the social media era, information warfare is not only central, but can readily slip out of control. Whilst Imran Khan showed political maturity in promptly releasing the IAF pilot, diplomatic defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory—the Maoist style confessional video Islamabad (or Rawalpindi?) released as Abhinandan returned to Indian territory managed to be both badly cut and sinister. It may also have been a breach of the Geneva Convention.

For India, the fact that this is an election year increases the pressure on Narendra Modi—politicians who lose wars rarely win elections. In turn, Pakistan will take considerable comfort from Modi's position. Indian action can readily be dismissed as an attempt to play to the gallery, crude nationalism designed to rally voters. To this backdrop, Imran Khan can style himself the diplomatic statesman, seeking new ways forward. Regardless of elections, India sees itself as having taken two low blows from the international community. The first, directly relevant to Pulwama, has been the failure of the United Nations Security Council to list JeM leader Masood Azhar as a terrorist. Here Pakistan's "all-weather friend" China, has vetoed efforts by India, the US, Britain and France to designate Azhar via the Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee. Last year's UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report into Kashmir was equally problematic, euphemistically referring to designated terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, Jaish e Mohammed and Harakat ul Mujahidin, who cross from Pakistan into Jammu and Kashmir after receiving training in the Islamic republic, as "armed groups". When international co-operation against terrorism proves impossible, action like that of 26 February becomes inevitable.

TWO HEAVYWEIGHTS LOOK ON

As India and Pakistan wrestle, what of the true heavyweights, China and the United States? For a variety of reasons, Donald Trump's America is further from Islamabad than any US government in decades. As a businessman, Trump sees more that interests him in India, than Pakistan. The latter's relationship with his number one opponent, China, further cements his instinctive disinterest, whether it be Nawaz Sharif or Imran Khan in power. Outside of the White House, American public opinion, if stirred at all by South Asia, is influenced by two primary factors—the little most Americans know about Pakistan is Osama Bin Laden was found there, and the increasing presence in the US of a prosperous, confident Indian minority. It is a constituency the Republicans would do well to court.

For China, a war played out in proximity to the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor would be extremely bad for business. It will seek to quietly stand beside Pakistan, whilst hoping events are now

settling down. China is also conscious that as its human rights abuses against the Uighurs become more widely known, particularly in the Muslim majority world, it does not want to inflame Pakistan's influential clerics.

RESPONSES IN THE UK

The jihad in Syria, and political agitation over the Palestinian question, can fire the hearts of young British Muslims. Kashmir, less so. Whilst some media reporting stressed the potential for conflict in the sub-continent to spark on Britain's streets, it has, so far, failed to do so. In the House of Commons, however, the response from some Labour MPs in constituencies with sizeable communities of Pakistani heritage, was at times fiery. In the Jammu and Kashmir debate on 27 February, MPs Naz Shah and Yasmin Qureshi were cheerleading for Pakistan. Afzal Khan MP's earlier denial of Pakistani involvement in Pulwama was more calculating, but indicative of the role some members of the House of Commons All Party Kashmir group, seek to play. The British Minister for Asia and the Pacific, Mark Field, batted away suggestions the UK may seek to play any role greater than calling for calm. Despite our historical relationship with the participants, in this wrestling match, Britain is not interested in being the referee.

Dr. Paul Stott

Views expressed are the author's own and independent of his institutional affiliations.

Dr Paul Stott is a Research Fellow in the Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism at the Henry Jackson Society, a Tutor in the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS University of London, and a Research Fellow at the European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS). He tweets @MrPaulStott.

This article was published in [Sunday Guardian Live](#).