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INDIA-PAK AND THE CORONAVIRUS

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Indo-Pak relations are unlikely to change anytime in the future. Over the years, despite Pak's attempts to destabilize India, the country has grown from strength to strength, while Pak has steadily moved downhill. Indian economic, military, and diplomatic power have made it the destination of choice for military and economic cooperation as also diplomatic engagement.

On the other hand, Pak has attempted to make itself globally relevant by its nuclear status and its geostrategic location bordering Afghanistan, which has remained in turmoil for over four decades along with being the gateway to Central Asia. It had been bailed out by multiple international financial institutions for the 13th time last year. Last week it received an additional USD 1.6 Billion bailout to handle the Coronavirus. In coming years, its debt burden would severely impact its economy.

South Asia being hit by the Coronavirus should have logically been the time for Pakistan to reconsider its priorities, an anti-India stance or caring for its people in times of a pandemic. The opportunity provided by Prime Minister Modi when he held a video conference of all SAARC leaders could have been a game changer. Pak could have used the opportunity to display

solidarity with all other SAARC nations and gained from Indian support as others did. It could have been the first step towards peace. It wasted the opportunity by sending a junior minister to the conference and forcing him to raise Kashmir, alienating India further.

Since the incident, Pak Foreign Minister SM Qureshi has spoken to all SAARC members seeking that the SAARC Covid19 Emergency Fund initially pledged by India and contributed to by all members (Pak has announced its contribution, but nothing beyond that), be moved under the SAARC Secretary General. The intention behind creating the fund was that nations would assist others in the region to the value of their pledge. India has already supplied medical equipment and medicine worth USD 1.7 Million out of USD 10 Million committed, not including costs for transportation, which is being borne by the Indian government.

No South Asian nation backed Pakistan nor commented on its request. The SAARC secretariat stated on Pak's demand, 'no such modalities, as sought by Pakistan for the fund had been worked out, and no such formal fund had to be created.' Pak has possibly made a promise to support other SAARC nations upto an amount of USD 3 Million only for publicity purposes. With Imran Khan making global video appeals for debt relief, it is unlikely that Pak would contribute.

In embarrassment, Pak skipped the SAARC trade meeting and the training program for SAARC healthcare professionals conducted by India. Its call for a video conference of health ministers will happen only if India takes the lead as it coordinates medical support to all SAARC nations. Nations have received medical support from India, some even had Indian medical teams deployed to establish needed facilities. Pak was ignored. Evidently, in the current scenario it is SAARC less Pakistan.

Tensions along the LoC, including infiltration attempts and ceasefire violations, with small incidents of violence in the region has displayed a desperation within Pak. It has realised that in case the valley remains peaceful, Kashmir will no longer be on international agenda and any attempt to revive it would meet global resistance. Its current attempts to push discussion on Kashmir in global forums has met with failure. However, to satisfy its domestic audience, it continues raising this in its briefings and discussions with other nations.

Indian military capability development continues despite it battling the pandemic. It compels Pak to shift vitally needed funds from controlling the pandemic to enhancing its security concerns. Post Balakote, the cross-border strike and artillery fire assaults on terrorist launchpads and known Pak camps

supporting their infiltration, Pak has realized that Indian reactions would never be the same and it will respond with more force and vigour, targeting Pak deeper inside, possibly even accepting collateral casualties amongst POK's civilian population. Hence, its strategy for Kashmir has changed, wherein it seeks to avoid attacks which could result in large casualties inviting an Indian counterstrike. It has begun concentrating on diplomatic actions, which has few takers.

Within Pak, its anti-India and pro-Kashmir lobby has gained immense power. These hardliners created and supported by the deep state are now a force to reckon with. No political leadership can afford to ignore them. Nawaz attempted and faced the music. Hence, due to its own long-term misguided policies, Pak has been left with no option but to continue with its tirade despite it being disadvantageous to it.

With Malaysia also moving into the Indian circuit, Pak is left with just China and Turkey. Pak was always supported in the FATF by Malaysia and its vote was the crucial third vote needed to keep it out of the FATF Blacklist. It is possible that renewed ties with India and provision of medical support at this critical juncture could lead to Malaysia avoiding backing Pak in the next FATF meeting, making it open to being blacklisted.

Within Pak there is rising anger in POK and Gilgit Baltistan. Doctors are on strike as they lack basic facilities. Reports flow of Pak moving Corona positive cases from Punjab to POK, solely to ensure that army residential colonies and cantonments in Punjab remain unaffected. Mirpur and other regions in POK have seen an influx of positive cases from Punjab. POK residents have been stating on social media that the Ehsaas scheme launched by the government, which involves handing cash to those below poverty line, has not been implemented in their region, displaying a bias within the country.

There are similar complaints from Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In these states, funds are short while health care is even more rudimentary. The government ignores these regions as its residents continue to protest the presence of the Pak army.

China is currently facing global backlash for its mishandling of the Coronavirus. It would therefore need allies with global power, India being one. While China may rebound economically, it is unlikely to be the same power as it was a few months ago. The first impact of its economic downtrend would come on the CPEC, which has in most ways been a white elephant. It would insist on Pak investing its share before it invests additional

funds. Pak has already misused its earmarked funds for the CPEC, diverting it for the need of the army. Hence, could lead to a stalemate.

Pak has in recent times exploited India's internal situation by enhancing religious divide employing social media. It is now time for India to payback by an effective information warfare strategy. The target should be its disgruntled population in Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, POK, Gilgit Baltistan and Indian Kashmiri's who have till now been influenced by Pak's fake propaganda. This should be launched on all forms of social and digital media.

India should exploit Pak's poor health services and bias towards Punjab by displaying strikes by medical staff in POK and Gilgit Baltistan on lack of protective clothing, pushing in of Coronavirus positive cases from Punjab into the region and poor medical facilities. Simultaneous should be the positive projection of massive movement of medical supplies and other stores into the valley. The recent interview of GOC 15 Corps on inputs of Pak pushing in positive Corona patients into Kashmir to infect Indian Kashmiri's must be continuously projected.

One major area which will tilt the balance in information warfare is the difference between the two nations in rescuing its own populace from Coronavirus trouble spots across the globe. India has evacuated its residents from most countries, whereas Pak has ignored its own.

Pak immature and miss judged action has left it ignored in SAARC. Its close ally, Malaysia, is moving away. Financially, it continues to struggle to survive. In the current scenario, it is time for India to take the information warfare game to its logical conclusion, opening Pak failures and its ignoring Kashmiri residents. India must exploit the situation.

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