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India, Pakistan peer into the abyss

By M K Bhadrakumar

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Was it a military confrontation - the week long India-Pakistan acrimony over bloody incidents on the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir, which resulted in the killing of four soldiers? Was it a potential nuclear flashpoint? In retrospect, it was more like a brawl - a noisy, disorderly quarrel.

Indeed, it ended as abruptly as it erupted and very little broken china is visible as the two armies, which apparently went for each other's jugulars, summarily pulled back. India claimed Pakistani forces had killed two of its soldiers and mutilated the bodies, while Pakistan, which denied any wrongdoing, alleged Indian troops crossed into its side (which India denied), killing and injuring their soldiers.

To be sure, a cleaning up operation is necessary but, fortunately no permanent fixtures have been damaged on the dance floor - although the waltz cannot resume as if nothing happened.

Meanwhile, what lessons can be drawn? At least a dozen can be discerned.

First and foremost, the fracas drew attention to a barely visible aspect of the tenuous security situation on the LOC, which, unlike the India-Pakistan Boundary is an ill-defined line drawn up hastily out of the defunct Cease-Fire Line even as the 1971 war ended with very many geographical salients in the difficult terrain not easy to defend for either army and where,

therefore, a constant, tenacious dogfight has been going on to "straighten" the LOC for gaining unilateral advantage.

The point is, it is utterly futile to apportion blame and equally pointless to isolate and dissect any particular incident, howsoever gruesome it might be, as precisely where discord erupted in violence. Have such brutal incidents taken place in the past? The answer is "yes", and both sides, it now transpires, have committed abominable, unspeakable acts.

A long-term solution lies in the LOC attaining the sanctity of an international border, but then, it is directly linked to the resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

From the Indian angle, the imperative lies in the stabilization of the situation in Jammu & Kashmir for which a durable ceasefire on the LOC and end to cross-border filtration by the militants is an absolute prerequisite.

From the Pakistani viewpoint, on the contrary, keeping Jammu & Kashmir in a state of controlled animation happens to be a politico-military necessity. This is for various recognizable reasons, some of which are linked to Pakistan's internal politics and the geopolitics of the region, while others would relate to the flawed relationship with India.

Following from this, it is important for the Indian side to remember that the famous November 2003 ceasefire on the border announced by the then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (and which has largely held up until recently) was a unilateral decision by the military dictator and not the outcome of a negotiated bilateral arrangement between the two countries.

If a decade ago it suited Pakistan to unilaterally opt for a ceasefire on the LOC and redeploy its troops to the western front due to the emergent situation of the war in Afghanistan (and the growing tensions on the Afghan-Pakistan border), there is a qualitative difference to the situation today.

Unsurprisingly, there is gnawing anxiety in the Indian mind whether today's situation is going to be any less dangerous than that of the late 1980s, when Pakistan "defeated" a superpower and sent it packing home from the Hindu Kush and thereafter reset its sights on India and redeployed the militant forces of "jihadism", who had by then become redundant but were raring to go in search of new pastures.

Lest it be forgotten, already by the end-1980s and early 1990s, J&K was bleeding profusely and a "low-intensity war" was in full swing, with Pakistan in full battle cry.

Suffice to say, therefore, it will be exceedingly foolish on India's part to lower its guard now that the recent heightened tensions have subsided and the guns have fallen silent on the LOC. The plain truth is that there is no certainty whatsoever that the lull during this week is going to be enduring.

The best spin that can be given is that the Pakistani army, which is credited to be a professional army, couldn't have stooped to the extent of mutilating and disfiguring the dead bodies of Indian soldiers and therefore it must be the handiwork of some "non-state actors".

That brings up an intriguing question: is everything under control within the Pakistani army? At the end of the day, there are no serious takers on the Indian side for the thesis that the Pakistani army was hoodwinked by the "jihadis", considering that the LOC is a highly fortified Maginot Line and the Pakistani army is indeed a capable organization that is not easily taken in by "jihadi" elements who are, after all, its proxies.

Nonetheless, New Delhi would have taken note that the Pakistani GHQ in Rawalpindi did not react to a statement by the Indian army chief General Bikram Singh, who warned of an "aggressive" response to future ceasefire violations.

In fact, Pakistani assurances followed within 48 hours at the level of the Director-General of Military Operations that strict instructions have been issued to local units to observe the ceasefire on the LOC. Interestingly, Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Kayani never once spoke through the entire week. The signal seems to have been that nothing extraordinary had happened on the LOC.

Of course, uninformed Indian opinion might conclude that Pakistan "blinked". But there is much more to what happened than meets the eye. The confidential exchanges at the top echelons of the Indian and Pakistani military leadership have always been meaningful, and both sides try to comprehend each other's compulsions (even whilst disagreeing).

Suffice to say, the recent fracas has been brought to end by the military leaders, at which point politicians and diplomats are taking over. However, it goes to the credit of politicians and diplomats that they also may have created a legacy by now in the current history of the India-Pakistan relationship.

The point is, neither side tried to "internationalize" the recent tensions. The two major influences on Pakistan - China and the United States - actually advised the efficacy of the bilateral track. The dialogue process remains open, too.

India's diplomatic voice consistently sounded conciliatory even while the political voice addressing the domestic audience spoke stridently. In sum, the dialogue process may have slowly, steadily begun kicking in despite the serious shortfalls in its substantive outcome so far.

Again, it wouldn't have escaped notice in New Delhi that there has been a near-complete absence of rhetoric or "war mongering" on the part of the Pakistani politicians and political parties. This is further confirmation that the political discourse within Pakistan has significantly transformed.

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh rightly placed this transformation within the matrix of that country's democratization process, and, more important, he underlined that India needs to think of ways of taking the relationship with Pakistan forward by addressing the constituency that believes in democracy. The outcome of the political struggle in Pakistan will have great bearing for the India-Pakistan dialogue.

All in all, the good thing is that India and Pakistan peered into the abyss of the future and

decided they didn't like it. This foreknowledge will serve a purpose if it gives a new sense of urgency and injects new life into the dialogue process. But it is too much to expect new thinking at this juncture.

India's capacity to influence the processes in Pakistan remains limited, and if anything the political priorities for the Indian leadership as the general election in 2014 draws closer virtually preclude the scope for taking major foreign-policy initiatives. For Pakistan too, an assertion of civilian supremacy in policymaking on issues of core concern to India such as the dismantling of the infrastructure of terrorism existing on its soil is a long haul.

Least of all, with the geopolitics of the region remaining as complicated as they are at present, the easy route for both sides will be to hunker down until things gain greater clarity.