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## China is the winner in India's surgical strikes at Pakistan

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

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*In the current Indo-Pak flare-up, China has taken a mature stance. Also Beijing has begun replacing Washington as the pre-eminent influence over Islamabad. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has no option but to order a reboot of the normalization process with China, with the locus shifting away from obsessive competition to optimal cooperation*

In geopolitics, the definition of beneficiary is fraught with ambiguity. It becomes an amorphous, shifting term, since realignments can produce strange bedfellows – and unintended beneficiaries.



*An Indian army soldier keeps guard from a bunker near the border with Pakistan in Abdullahian, southwest of Jammu, September 30. REUTERS/Mukesh Gupta*

India's 'surgical strikes' across the Line of Control with Pakistan on September 29 put it in an ambiguous zone, because China becomes the unintended beneficiary.

This has profound significance for India's foreign policies vis-à-vis a host of issues, especially its strategic posturing in the Himalayas and Indian Ocean.

The ruling elites do not yet grasp this. It needs some explaining.

Forty-eight hours down the line after the 'surgical strikes', Delhi is manifestly eager to 'de-escalate' – if only Pakistan will oblige. However, Pakistan will retaliate.

There is no shred of evidence that Pakistan fears, as the ruling circles in Delhi imagine, that India has a 'different leader' (Modi) today whom it should not trifle with. They do not understand that Pakistan's threshold of pain is very high.

And that is more so now, because of Delhi's decision to wade into the insurgency in Balochistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's August 15 speech from the ramparts of the Moghul citadel actually preceded the terrorist attack on the Indian base at Uri on September 18.

That Modi's speech reopened old cauterized wounds in the Pakistani psyche over the vivisection of their country 45 years ago is something Indians blithely overlook.

Equally, Pakistan genuinely believes that India has already lost Kashmir. In the Pakistani calculus, payback time for 1971 (surrender of Pakistan in the Indo-Pak war leading to the creation of Bangladesh) is nearing. Therefore, Pakistan sees no sense in 'de-escalating' and letting India off the hook.

Kashmir, Afghanistan, Balochistan – this is India's Bermuda Triangle. Suffice it to say, India is set to become a national security state for a foreseeable future.

The 13-year old 'ceasefire' on the LOC is no more valid. The dissolution of the ceasefire (in a formal sense) creates great fluidity in the security matrix impacting the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir which is witnessing a mass upheaval for almost three months.

Enter China. Since India's western borders need much greater attention from now on, the steady military build-up on the disputed border with China to seek some modicum of parity with the overall Chinese presence will have to wait or be abandoned for the time being.

Does India move its formidable BrahMos missile system up to Tawang border town in the disputed Arunachal Pradesh region? Will India deploy more armor in the disputed Ladakh region? There are no easy answers.

India may have to settle for peace and tranquillity on the disputed border on China's terms, handling 'incursions' tactfully and calmly, eschewing plans to create new facts on the ground.

Nonetheless, China would only see India's strategic restraint as borne out of realism. The heart of the matter is that a terrible beauty is born in the post-surgical strikes regional security scenario, forcing India to make a realistic reappraisal of China policies.

In the current flare-up, China has taken a mature stance after careful deliberation. The visit by the chairman of India's Joint Intelligence Committee R. N. Ravi to Beijing last week turned out to be a fortuitous happening. Ravi met China's intelligence czar and Politburo member Meng Jianzhu.

Meng told Ravi, according to Xinhua, that "strengthened counter-terrorism cooperation between China and India was conducive to the interests of the people of both countries... (and) voiced hope that the two sides could put to action counter-terrorism collaboration and protect regional security and that of the two countries."

On the other hand, Makhdum Khusro Bakhtyar, Pakistani Special Envoy on Kashmir who arrived in Beijing after Ravi's visit, was only received at the level of Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Liu Zhenmin.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman later signaled that Beijing's post-cold war era neutral stance on Kashmir is cast in iron notwithstanding present-day vicissitudes:

"Vice Minister Liu Zhenmin listened to Pakistani envoys' briefings on the situation in Kashmir and Pakistan's standpoint, and emphasized that China has been following the Kashmir situation and takes seriously Pakistan's position on Kashmir."

"China believes that the Kashmir issue is a left-over from history which shall be resolved by relevant parties through dialogue and consultation. China hopes that Pakistan and India will strengthen channels for dialogue, properly handle their differences, improve bilateral relations and together protect the regional peace and stability."

These remarks might disappoint 'hardliners' in India (and the West) who subscribe to the thesis that China fuels India-Pakistan tensions and that China-Pakistan relations are essentially 'India-centric'.

To be sure, Modi government's hardening policy shift toward China, as evident for the past year and a half, is becoming unsustainable.

Three major vectors demand rethink. First and foremost, any 'action plans' by the Indian establishment on Tibet may have to be mothballed.

Simply put, Delhi may have to reconcile with the bitter reality that China will seize the upper hand to calibrate the transition in Tibet to the post-Dalai Lama era in a direction it chooses.

No matter the volatility of the situation in Tibet, a 'hands-off' policy may turn out to be the Indian establishment's only remaining option.

Second, Delhi will have to be extremely wary of causing annoyance to China over the disputes in the South China Sea. This rethink is anyway overdue, given emergent realities in the region.

The ASEAN is reluctant to be drawn into face-off with China; US-Philippines alliance and Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (two key underpinnings of US' pivot to Asia) are in a state of drift; and, all indications are that Obama Administration is done with ruffling China's feathers in the remaining period of the presidency.

India had gotten all dressed up but there's really nowhere to go, as the assumption that it is much in demand as a 'balancer' vis-à-vis China in Southeast Asia turns out to be delusional. India needs to get real.

Third, most important, China will not brook India's opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is one thing, from Beijing's perspective, for India to stand akimbo apropos One Belt One Road, but it is an entirely different thing to try to undermine CPEC.

The CPEC is a crucial vector of China's geo-strategy and Beijing will advance it with all the resources at its command. China will expect India to back off.

Suffice to say, while India's "surgical strikes" on Thursday help Modi to regain his aura as a muscular Hindu nationalist leader and to address widespread public outrage within India over Uri attack, these could only be short-term gains. Whereas, prospects for medium and long-term escalation of tensions with Pakistan are very real.

Meanwhile, US' capacity to moderate India-Pakistan tensions has significantly diminished in the recent years, while China has begun replacing US as the pre-eminent influence over Pakistan.

Modi has no option but to order a reboot of the normalization process with China, with the locus shifting away from obsessive competition to optimal cooperation.