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By Col R Hariharan

[Here is a summary of my comments to print and television media on the India-Pakistan standoff on specific issues raised by them on January 15 & 17.]

On Indian Prime Minister's strong statement and later developments

Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's statement has relevance externally to India-Pakistan relations as well as internally to the people. His demand to Pakistan for bringing to book those responsible for killing and mutilating two Indian soldiers on January 8, 2012 is a break from the past. Despite strong opposition criticism Prime Minister had always made an effort, at time bending over backwards, to ensure that peace process with Pakistan is not derailed. He did not react sufficiently strongly against Pakistan even to the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Similarly, he also refrained from reacting strongly two beheadings were carried out by Pakistani troops in 2011 (as stated by the Army Chief General Bikram Singh) to keep the peace process going. In fact this incident was never reported in public.

The Prime Minister's statement came a full week after the barbaric incident. Did he want to give Pakistan sufficient time to come out with a face saving interim reply? Or did he lose his cool when the Pak Foreign Minister Ms Hina Rabbani went on a publicity gig by offering to get the incident investigated by the UN Military Observers Group (UNMOGIP)? Or was he exasperated by Pakistan routinely not responding to Indian sensitivity on not only this issue but on many others including action against terrorist masterminds of 26/11 attacks in Pakistan? The use of the words 'it cannot be business as usual' would shows his level of exasperation with Pakistan as he is not given to such usage in public statements. Whatever be the reason, he has shown a red card to Pakistan – 'Don't take me or India for granted.'

Dr Manmohan Singh's detractors might say that he was only reacting to Indian public outrage which was being capitalized by the opposition. This could also be a reason because in Indian politics public posturing more than concrete action is an important tool. Increasing public protests demonstrated after the gang rape issues and by Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement have shown the inability of government in dealing with public sentiments. So the Prime Minister may have also made his statement in response to the growing anger among the people over the incident whipped up by real time coverage by visual media

It is a good thing that the Prime Minister had understood the need for communicating his views to the public. He should make it a regular feature. This has remained one of the biggest weaknesses of his government. Such public briefings through regular press conferences would make the public aware of the complexities in dealing with a hydra-headed Pakistan where three power centres – political mainstream, the army, and the Islamist segment aided by Jihadi terrorists, are trying to outplay each other.

Has the Pak foreign minister purposely escalated the situation?

Pak foreign minister Ms Rabbani was in the US as the issue was heating up in the Indo-Pak front. She made a number of statements on the situation after the beheading. The key one to my mind was her statement: "What we saw from India was a statement saying that a proportionate response would be given. We see (statements) India has capacity and capability to (make that response), we see warmongering and we saw that proportionate response on January 8 when a Pakistani havildar was almost target-shot by Indian soldiers." This statement apparently expressing her disappointment after Indian Army Chief and the Prime Minister strongly reacted to the incident, showed no intention to defuse the explosive situation building up that could damage Indo-Pak relations. Probably she had a larger strategic aim of using incident to get Kashmir issue back on the UN agenda. As Pakistan is chairing the UN Security Council now such the possibility was probably tempting for her.

Probably, she realized that she had underestimated India's reaction to the incident particularly from Dr Manmohan Singh. Her subsequent statement (also made in New York) calling for talks with her Indian counterpart to reduce tension along the LoC in the interest of peace and stability would indicate this. Pak high commissioner in New Delhi Salman Bashir's statement on similar note made on its wake would confirm this.

Probably Ms Rabbani's actions also have an internal context in the developing internal political crisis in Pakistan. The ruling PPP-led government feels it is facing an existential threat. There is a latent suspicion of the army and the judiciary colluding in this. Now there an embarrassing line up of opposition has also appeared before it faces the June 2013 elections. Dr Tahir ul Qadri, the Sufi cleric and founder of the Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) staged a "million march" (though media estimated it at 25,000) in Islamabad demanding the dissolution of national assembly and hold the elections under neutral supervision. He had also invited Imran Khan, the leader of Tehree-e-Insaf (Tel), who has similar views, to join the protest. And these developments suspiciously coincide with Pakistan Supreme Court's order to

arrest Parvez Raja, the Prime Minister to face corruption charges. However, for the time being the government has come to an agreement with Qadri to attend to some of his concerns. But it is likely to haunt the PPP in the coming months as election mood sets in.

At this critical juncture, has PPP decided to show it was not soft on India? We need to understand the dynamics of the developing situation in Pakistan and respond with firmly avoiding snowballing of anti-Pakistan hype as it could derail the India-Pakistan composite dialogue process, which is already limping. It is easy to be cynical and say India-Pakistan relations can never be mended; but wisdom lies in attempting it and achieving it.

Even after a flag meeting, firing across LoC has continued. Pakistan has accused India of killing its soldiers. Was the Indian Army Chief statement provocative?

We need to understand the limitations of flag meetings. These are between local commanders from both sides to minimise misapprehensions between the two sides. So it is purely local in nature. Even after the flag meeting, Pak forces have continued firing across the LoC. This was not only to show Pak army's teeth but also to facilitate infiltration of terrorists. General Bikram Singh has also said that mines with Pak markings have been unearthed on the Indian side; apparently planting them was also probably a method of provocation after the firing.

General Bikram Singh's strong statement was made after Pakistan government had sufficient time to respond positively. As head of the Army he has a responsibility to defend the territorial integrity of the nation. At the same time it should conduct itself so that the 2003 ceasefire agreement in J and K is not violated. After the beheading there had been widespread speculation that our army had been restrained from retaliating in kind whenever Pakistan army fires. In a bid to set the record straight, he had warned that India reserved the right to respond to such provocations at a time and place of its choosing. At the same time he has also made it clear such response would be tactical and local to ensure it does not become out of hand. The statement makes it clear that the army was alert to the dynamic situation and its response would be calibrated to respond appropriately.

What do the developments so far indicate?

India Pakistan relations have entered a new tricky phase after the beheading incident and Indian strong statement. The continuing border violations even after the much delayed flag meeting indicated the Pak army is in no mood to de-escalate the volatile situation. However, the statements of the Foreign Minister and the Pak High Commissioner indicate probably Pakistan does not want the situation to go out of control. So we can expect Pak army to conduct itself across the LoC better; however, the situation needs to be watched as there is a lot of volatility in Pakistan in which the army could emerge as a major player.

For the time being India has not responded to the Pak invitation for talks between the two sides at foreign minister's level. If past conduct is

any indication we would probably relent and talk to Pakistan. When we do this, two items should come on top of the agenda.

a. We should insist on the disbanding of over 40 terrorist camps on the Pak side across the LoC should be the top priority. Otherwise regardless of confidence building measures, the Pak army and terrorist groups have an option of taking provocative actions to destabilize the situation. The unearthing of mines with Pak markings inside Indian territory even as the situation was becoming explosive shows this.

b. Apart from vigilance along the LoC, we need to be vigilant on Pak borders in Punjab and Rajasthan as well. In particular in Punjab, there had been a renewed effort in 2012 to revive Sikh extremism. Similarly security along Nepal and Bangladesh borders also need to tightend as Pak terror groups and ISI have used these countries as take off points for their activity in India. Last year there was a report which indicated the use of Colombo as a training base by Pak terrorists in tandem with Indian Mujahideen.

c. We need to enhance the quality of border surveillance using modern technology devices. Though a beginning has been made it is not adequate. This would reduce the level of human error.

(Col. R Hariharan, a retired Military Intelligence officer, is associated with the South Asia Analysis Group and the Chennai Centre for China Studies. E- mail: colhari@yahoo.com [1] Blog: www.colhariharan.org [2])

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