

February 26, 2021

Guns Fall Silent on the LoC

But can peace follow?

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India's need to prevent a two-front threat & to be on the right side of the US underlies the sudden decision on a LoC ceasefire. This opens up many possibilities but Modi's long-running anti-Pakistan domestic politics can come in the way of a durable peace.

The Indian and Pakistan militaries simultaneously announced on Thursday that they had “agreed for strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight 24/25 Feb 2021”. Taken literally, the announcement pertains to affirming the 18-year-old ceasefire on the line dividing the control of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, where the two armies have already traded fire nearly 300 times this year. Last year, there were 5,133 violations of the ceasefire causing heavy civilian and military casualties.

This ceasefire announcement will come as a major humanitarian relief to the border residents and will be welcomed by the soldiers of both armies deployed on the LoC.

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Officials told me on conditions of anonymity that the respite to soldiers and border residents is a side-effect of the announcement but not its underlying basis. This is the first step of a mutually agreed time-bound process between the political leadership of the two countries, where more public engagements and meetings are likely to be announced soon. The process is expected to result in a normalisation of bilateral ties and a resolution of longstanding issues between the two countries, if things go as per plan.

The significance of this announcement goes beyond the military and humanitarian impact of the ceasefire, and provides an insight into the events unleashed by geopolitical churning in South Asia. The nine-month long border standoff between India and China in Ladakh, which has witnessed some tentative steps towards a resolution this month, triggered a serious rethink in India about its strategic challenges. The more nuanced policies of the Biden administration in the United States towards the Indo-Pacific and Afghanistan, while broadly in continuation from the Trump administration, have influenced New Delhi's decision-making matrix. This attempt at denouement with Pakistan is not going to be easy for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to undertake, due to his Hindu majoritarian political ideology, as evident from the many U-turns in his Pakistan policy in the past seven years of his premiership.

The troubled line

The Line of Control or the LoC is a legacy of British colonial rule in South Asia, which left the region in a hurry in 1947 with the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir claimed by both countries. The two countries have fought three wars over Kashmir, and a UN mandated ceasefire after the 1948 war created a ceasefire line agreed upon by both countries. It was converted into the 740-km long Line of Control after the 1971 War for the liberation of Bangladesh. But for the wars, the LoC had been largely inactive and porous till it gained prominence after the start of insurgency in Kashmir in 1989.

As Pakistan started providing rudimentary military training to young Kashmiri men, pushing battle-hardened Pakistani fighters from the Afghanistan conflict against the Soviet Union, and sending weapons and other material into Kashmir, the LoC became increasingly militarised and a theatre of conflict between the two armies. Pakistan's ill-fated attempt to alter the LoC through military means in Kargil in 1999, a year after both India and Pakistan had gone nuclear, caused a rise in military deployment and use of heavy weaponry by both the armies on the LoC. By 2003, India had decided to erect a border fence along the LoC and the diplomatic talks between Pakistani military dictator Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister AB Vajpayee led to the announcement of a ceasefire on the LoC in November 2003. It was meant to be a confidence-building measure, which would pave the way for an eventual resolution of the Kashmir problem but Musharraf's internal problems in Pakistan put paid to those hopes.

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The ceasefire nevertheless worked successfully—after 5,767 firing incidents in 2002, there were hardly any incidents recorded from 2004 to 2006. The firing incidents remained in double digits till 2011, slowly climbing to 583 in 2014, the year Modi assumed power. The numbers kept rising and for the past three years, the firing and shelling along the LoC was so heavy and frequent—more than 10,000 recorded incidents between 2018 and 2020—that it had left the 2003 agreement redundant.

Data of ceasefire violations on the LoC			
2002	5767	2012	114
2003	2841	2013	347
2004	4	2014	583
2005	6	2015	405
2006	3	2016	449
2007	21	2017	971
2008	86	2018	2140
2009	35	2019	3479
2010	70	2020	5133
2011	62	2021	299 (till 24 February)

Source: Official data of the Government of India

At an operational level, the repeated targeting of forward military posts and villages along the LoC caused widespread damage and destruction, and forced thousands of border residents to migrate to safer places. Both the armies responded by constructing bunkers for these residents and even heavier retaliatory fire, reporting deaths of soldiers and civilians at regular intervals.

‘Cautious optimism’

The official mantra from both the sides about this week’s decision is ‘cautious optimism’ and there is abundant reason for exercising caution. Modi’s government has pursued a flip-flop policy towards Pakistan, starting from his invite to the then Pakistan Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, as part of a group of all south Asian heads of states, for his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014. He paid a surprise visit to Pakistan in December 2015 on Sharif’s birthday, which was followed, within days, by a terror attack on an Indian airbase. In a significant gesture, Modi’s government allowed a team of Pakistani investigators, including officials from the ill-famed intelligence agency, ISI, to visit the airbase. But by August 2016, the relationship had deteriorated enough for Modi to bring up the restive Pakistani province of Balochistan in his annual Independence Day speech from the ramparts of Red Fort in Delhi.

In September that year, India launched a much-publicised ‘surgical strike’ inside Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to avenge the killing of 18 soldiers at a military base in Kashmir in a terror attack. The relations had hit a nadir and the LoC became very active, till the two armies announced in May 2018 that they had “agreed to fully implement the ceasefire understanding of 2003 in letter and spirit forthwith”. That announcement didn’t last for long as the internal security situation in Kashmir started worsening, and the Modi government was facing a tough national election in 2019.

Just before the elections, a suicide car bombing in Kashmir led to the killing of 40 Indian paramilitary troopers. Even though the bomber was a young local Kashmiri boy, it was claimed by Pakistan-based terror group, Jaish-e-Mohammed. India retaliated by conducting an airstrike on a seminary in Balakot in mainland Pakistan, which led to a Pakistani airstrike near an Indian military base in Kashmir. India lost a fighter jet in an aerial skirmish and a fighter pilot was captured by Pakistan, with tensions rising such that both sides were ready to launch missile attacks till foreign intervention cooled tempers down and Pakistan released the pilot.

Narendra Modi got re-elected in 2019 on the back of a hyper-nationalistic and anti-Pakistan poll campaign, which was surprisingly followed by an attempted détente on the LoC that brought the cross-border infiltration down in the summer of 2019. In August 2019, Modi’s right-hand man and home minister, Amit Shah, revoked the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, taking a vow of reclaiming Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan at the earliest. Shocked by this move, Pakistan withdrew its High Commissioner from New Delhi and downgraded diplomatic ties with India. Things did not improve between the two countries as the

Modi government employed harsh security measures against the civilian population in Kashmir after August 2019, till India walked into a major border crisis with China in May 2020.

Genesis of announcement

The genesis of the announcement on 25 February lies in the Ladakh border crisis where the Indian political leadership was faced with the reality of a two-front collusive threat from China and Pakistan. With its economy in post-pandemic recession, New Delhi found that its under-resourced and unreformed military was unequal to the two-front challenge, even though it had tasked the military for this eventuality in 2009. This led to the Army hastily reorienting one of its strike corps from the Pakistan border to the China border. New Delhi realises that China provides a bigger strategic challenge than Pakistan in the long run, against which it can earn the support of western powers like the US, Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific. But China is a much bigger power with global ambitions, and New Delhi will neither accept a subservient role nor will it be able to trust Beijing for the foreseeable future. India is thus left with no option but to seek peace with Pakistan, leading to the ceasefire announcement.

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Till a few weeks prior to the ceasefire announcement, the top Indian military leadership was claiming that Pakistan “has been launching proxy war, and sponsoring, training, arming and equipping terrorists on their soil, which they keep infiltrating into Jammu and Kashmir”. It had doubled down on bringing a change in Pakistan’s policy by coercive military means, including heavy shelling on the LoC, cross-border ‘surgical strikes’ and Balakot airstrikes. While these may have a punitive value, they failed to infuse deterrence so as to alter Pakistani calculations on supporting militancy in Kashmir. Despite the evident lack of trust between the two armies, the Indian decision to re-engage with Pakistan by reinstating the ceasefire on the LoC is an acceptance of the futility of its policies so far, driven more by compulsion than by choice.



A house struck during cross-border shelling in which a mother and her two children were killed, Jhullas, Poonch district, March 2, 2019 (Nissar Ahmad/The Hindu)

The incoming Biden administration has shown its interest in moving American forces out of Afghanistan. Pakistan remains the major player in the ongoing negotiations between the US and the Taliban, and has an understanding with some of the key officials in the new administration. If India puts Pakistan under pressure, it can jeopardise American interests in Afghanistan. Moreover, like all new US administrations, the Biden administration may also attempt to reduce tensions between two nuclear-armed neighbours. By collaborating

with the US in the Indo-Pacific, aligning with its interests in Afghanistan, and taking the initiative for peace with Pakistan, New Delhi can be on the right side of the Biden administration, which has been rather blunt in publicly pointing out the anti-democratic and authoritarian moves of Modi's government in recent months.

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Pakistan is China's biggest arms buyer and Beijing has invested \$62 bn in the flagship China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project under President Xi Jinping's Belt Road Initiative (BRI). The relations between the two countries have been described in Pakistan as being "higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, stronger than steel, clearer than eyesight, and sweeter than honey". Many Indian officials thus see India's Pakistan problem as a subset of its China problem, which makes any Indian strategy contingent on delinking Pakistan from China liable to fail. This raises the tantalising question of whether Beijing is a part of the LoC announcement and its agreement with New Delhi for a disengagement in Ladakh was contingent on a simultaneous peace deal between India and Pakistan. Indians would have been loath to accept such a condition as it would make Beijing an arbiter between New Delhi and Islamabad, acknowledging China as a superpower now enacting the role played by the US in the region for decades.

Internal dichotomies

These geopolitical contradictions are tough to resolve but they are no patch on the internal dichotomies in India that will be cracked open by this move by the Modi government. The Hindu majoritarian ideology of Modi's parent organisation, the RSS, has always identified Pakistan as an enemy country and questioned its existence. It has identified Indian Muslims with the neighbouring country, placing question marks about their 'Indianness'. Ministers in Modi's government and senior party leaders have publicly asked critics and opponents of his government to "go to Pakistan". The Citizenship Amendment Act brought in 2019 furthered the paradigm by focusing on treatment of minority religious communities in Muslim-majority countries. The popular narrative in the media, particularly news television, has been viciously anti-Pakistan leading to a situation where no Pakistani actors or singers are now seen in Indian movies and no Pakistani cricketers are part of the highly successful Indian Premier League.

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Personally, Modi has always invoked Pakistan as an adversary during his electoral campaigns, going back to his days as the chief minister of Gujarat. His re-election campaign as the prime minister in 2019 was centred around his strong policies against Pakistan which brought the two countries to the brink of a war. An economy in decline, record joblessness, increasing social disharmony, and protests by farmers and workers have left him with few other issues to campaign on. A 180 degree turn on what has consistently been Narendra Modi's most successful electoral and political strategy will put his party, his political supporters, and his ideological mentors in a quandary who will not be able to whip up anti-Pakistani sentiment around elections. Having made anti-Pakistan rhetoric an integral feature of his election campaigns, this imposes a significant domestic constraint on Modi in his dealing with Pakistan and has the potential to trip up the current initiative.

India's sudden move to secure harmonious ties with Pakistan has the potential to reshape South Asia by placing the region on a path of peaceful development. It can alter the geopolitics of the Asian continent, the location of the forthcoming geopolitical contestation between the US and China. But the plan is beset with several contradictions, internal and external, which bear the burden of history, the reality of geography and the compulsions of electoral politics.