

Understanding the LoC Flare-up

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A moratorium on cross-border firing, which largely held from 2003 to 2012, stands broken. About two dozen lives have been lost since the beginning of this year. Why? The breakdown did not come from Mr. Nawaz Sharif who, risking his popularity within his party, has been arguing forcefully for peace with India. Nor is it likely that the infiltration of 8 January from the Pakistan side, which sparked off hostilities, was ordered by the Pakistan Army high command or even with its knowledge.

On the contrary the Army has quietly allowed trade across borders, as well as a political dialogue. It could have easily stopped both. Moreover, last year General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani admitted that the terrorism unleashed by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) had made the TTP more dangerous than India. It does not make sense for the Army to fight wars on two fronts. For India to provoke LoC hostilities is just as pointless.

So who started it? It doesn't take much guessing. Exacerbating Pakistan-India hostility is precisely the goal of *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, *Hizb-ul-Mujahideen*, and other such groups. The beheading of Lance Naik Hemraj Singh this January is characteristic of the jihadist modus operandi, not that of a professional army.

Predictably, the event led to fierce reactions and counter-reactions between the troops on both sides. Media anchors and politicians quickly jumped into the fray, further raising the temperature: Ms. Sushma Swaraj declared that, "If Pakistan does not return the severed head of the martyred soldier Hemraj, India should get at least 10 heads from the other side." The Pakistani response has been relatively measured.

The Pakistan Army is in a quandary today. It has been seriously attacked by jihadists, prepared earlier for covert operations in Kashmir. Internally, it is divided and confused. With so much on its hands, it does not want an escalation leading to war with India. On the other hand it is not keen about reigning in some "friendly" jihadist groups who could be its allies after 2014 in Afghanistan, where it sees itself in competition with India for power and influence.

Still more importantly, good jihadists are needed for fighting the bad jihadists of the TTP. This works, at least somewhat. For example, last Wednesday a TTP commander believed to be harboring Uzbek militants was killed along with four others in an IED attack, attributed to the Mullah Nazir group, in South Waziristan.ⁱ The TTP has recently accused the LeT of plotting to attack its bases and supporters in Mohmand Agency.ⁱⁱ This may be why Hafiz Saeed, the group's supremo, maintains a high public profile – he led the Eid prayers two Fridays ago and also addressed an Independence Day rally in Lahore.

Now out of control because of the short-sightedness of Pakistani leaders, Islamic militancy is devastating Pakistan. But it also poses a danger to India. Paradoxically, to deal with this, India needs a strong Pakistani state and army. Else, splintered into a hundred jihadist *lashkars*, each with its own agenda and tactics, Pakistan's territory would become India's eternal nightmare. As the Americans have discovered at great cost, the mightiest of war machines cannot prevent holy warriors from crossing borders. India's retaliatory options after a major jihadist attack would be severely limited. Pakistan is now equipped to fight a tactical nuclear war; Operation Cold Start is a non-starter.

For now the only action that makes sense is for troops on both sides to immediately cease firing, for political leaders to soothe rather than inflame, and for the media to act responsibly. The political dialogue must resume. Inseparable by geography, Pakistan and India are Siamese twins that have emerged together from the womb of history. For better or for worse, their futures will always remain inextricably tied together. It is for their citizens to press the cause for peace.

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ⁱ Key TTP commander among five killed in South Waziristan blast, Dawn, 22 August 2013ⁱ

ⁱⁱ Mohmand Agency: TTP accuses rival groups of plotting attacks on its bases, Express Tribune, June 9, 2013.