

# The India-China-Pakistan Triangle

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The subject of this article is really not one in which the author has any expertise or, for that matter, even deep knowledge. What is more, the issues to be addressed pertain to India's vital security interests and in all likelihood our intelligence and our defence establishments must have conducted a number of studies and exercises in this behalf. Nevertheless one makes so bold as to write on the subject because in 1898 a young Cavalry Lieutenant, Winston Churchill, had accompanied the British expedition into Swat and Buner as the Malakand Field Force. Churchill had taken leave and joined the expedition as a war correspondent. The operation was not well planned and the British suffered a number of tactical setbacks. This exercised Churchill to such an extent that he wrote a treatise on it entitled, "The Story of the Malakand Field Force". This highly critical piece was popularly dubbed as "A Subaltern's Advice to Generals". Well, if that was possible in 1898, then in 2014 why can an amateur not write on a subject on which he may have personal insights but no expertise?

When the present government took over the Prime Minister reached out to Pakistan by inviting its Prime Minister to attend the swearing-in ceremony. Nawaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, reciprocated and he and Narendra Modi had a face to face meeting and discussions. This has given rise to high hopes that Indo-Pak relations can take a new turn and the spirit engendered by Atal Bihari Vajpayee's bus journey to Lahore could revive and somehow India and Pakistan could move towards an era of peace. In the case of Vajpayee Kargil queered the pitch and in the present case there are ominous signs of increased tension on the border. On the one hand there is bonhomie and on the other there are bullets. Which is the reality?

One definite difference between India and Pakistan emerged on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014 itself. Modi in extending the invitation to Nawaz Sharif acted on his own because the Indian Prime Minister does not need anyone's permission to invite foreign heads of government to visit India. Nawaz Sharif, on the other hand, had to at least informally receive a nod from the Pakistan Army Chief in order to accept Narendra Modi's invitation. The signal is clear – the Indian Prime Minister is free to take his own decisions whereas the Pakistan Prime Minister does need at least the tacit approval of the Army. This further means that in the ultimate analysis the Council of Ministers and Parliament will take decisions relating to the greater interests of India because they are the government, whereas in Pakistan it is the Army which will give the ultimate approval because in effect it is the government there. Any Indian Prime Minister who forgets this and hopes that by engaging with his Pakistani counterpart he can bring about a sea change in Indo-Pak relations needs to get his head examined. These harsh words are used because one has in the past warned our rulers that they should not go into any exercise aimed at bringing about peace with Pakistan without bearing in mind that in that country the final arbiter is the Army. Even at the cost of repetition let it be stated that the Pakistan Army's very existence is dependent upon its projecting itself as the sole saviour of Pakistan against foreign aggression. For this it needs a permanent enemy and the only one in sight is India. Therefore, unless there is an environment of hostility if not outright belligerence the role of the Pakistan Army diminishes and this the Army cannot afford.

In the ultimate analysis the Pakistan Army can be brought on line only by one of two methods, the first being that the Pakistanis themselves develop such strong democratic institutions that the Army becomes truly subordinate to civil authority; the second being that the Pakistan Army is destroyed by us in war. The first is unlikely to happen because there are very strong religious forces which are not prepared to accept a western style democracy and which need an armed backing for Jihad, which is what lends the Pakistan Army strength. The second option is also doubtful unless India itself realises that without the unpleasant method of war in which we are totally successful the Pakistan Army can never be brought to a level where it supports peace. One mentions this because in any discussion with Pakistan India must bear in mind that the forces opposed to long lasting peace will never let this happen and, therefore, into the foreseeable future India will have to learn to

live with hostility. Because the overt part of hostility means low intensity conflict, India will have to develop a doctrine which is clear-cut and easily translatable into action to deal with such conflict. This is a task which will have to be undertaken by our intelligence agencies and defence establishment in tandem. In order to deter Pakistan from excessive adventurism the basics of our doctrine in dealing with low intensity conflict will have to be communicated to them and all violations will have to be replied to immediately and effectively so that the Pakistanis know that a heavy price will have to be paid for any attack on India. One mentions this because every time there is an attack on India there are strong words, there are defensive measure, but there is no overt or covert action in Pakistan which would persuade their Army, the ISI and Jihadist groups that their best interests lie in leaving India alone.

In the background is always the threat of Pakistani first use of their nuclear weapons. Without in any way underestimating the extent of threat as a result thereof, unless India opts for subordination to Pakistan we have to have clear-cut policy options before us on how to neutralise this threat. Obviously the best option is the diplomatic in which Pakistan is subjected to continuous scrutiny and is told in no uncertain terms by the global community that the threat of nuclear blackmail will not be tolerated. Even at the height of the Cold War America and its allies and the Soviet Union maintained a balance of terror which deterred both blocs from using nuclear blackmail in order to subjugate each other. We probably do hold an adequate stock of nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them for us to maintain a balance of nuclear terror with Pakistan, provided that Pakistan functions as a responsible government and acts accordingly. Unfortunately in Pakistan the government is only one player and there is a sufficient number of other groups, some of them organised and some of them merely terrorist cells, which can be expected to act capriciously. It is cold comfort to blow Pakistan to smithereens after we have already lost some cities to nuclear attack. Here we are talking of lakhs of casualties in a matter of moments and this is not an acceptable situation in today's world. Under these circumstances how effective will global scrutiny be in restraining Pakistan?

Assuming that there will be a high degree of unpredictability in how Pakistan will behave over a period of time one has to look at the option of military preparedness which could deter or even neutralise Pakistan. This would include such an upgrade of our intelligence apparatus and our surveillance and communication systems that we are able to pinpoint the exact location of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and also of the delivery systems, missiles or manned aircraft which would carry the nuclear ordnance to designated Indian targets. Our cyber warfare capability should be such that we can completely disrupt the Pakistani signals systems so that their command and control facilities are in complete disarray. We should be able to target both the arsenal and the delivery systems in such a way that we can hit them with pinpoint accuracy before they can take off or be launched. In other words, technology must be developed to an extent where we can virtually neutralise Pakistan's capacity to launch weapons at us. This may be an expensive proposition but what is money when there is a question of survival?

The Indian Armed Forces have also to be strengthened to an extent where in a short, sharp war they can destroy the Pakistan Armed Forces in detail. Perhaps government needs to give a single point directive to the three Service Chiefs to build up the capability of their own Service to individually and in coordination with the sister Services be able to destroy the Pakistan Armed Forces. For this the nation must, within a given time frame, be prepared to give the Services the weapon systems that they need and meet the training requirements so that India gains overwhelming military strength over Pakistan. Perhaps if this can be publicly demonstrated then Pakistan may desist from adventurism and we can then move both towards strengthening the democratic institutions in Pakistan and in establishment of peace with that country on a long term basis. What this means, in effect, is that vis-à-vis Pakistan India has to develop the capacity to counter both low intensity conflict and wage total war.

Pakistan has always banked on China as a country which would support it against India. In 1962 in Arunachal Pradesh and in Ladakh the Chinese made a strong armed intrusion, which was actually an invasion, in which the Indian Army was shown to be at a complete disadvantage. Certainly there was nothing to prevent the Chinese Army from moving into the Brahmaputra Valley. The Chinese declared an unilateral cease fire

after crossing Bomdi La and withdrew from the occupied territories almost as if sending a signal to India that its Army could overrun our Army at will. Fortunately India took the warning very seriously because the very causes which had caused the rot in the Army were dealt with. Krishna Menon's micro management was removed, a real professional was brought in as Army Chief and the Army was put through a thorough overhauling. The Henderson-Brookes report was taken very seriously and though it has not been made public, the fact remains that many of its recommendations were adopted and the Army once again professionalised. This stood us in good stead in the 1965 war against Pakistan and in 1967 at Nathu La the Indian Army gave a bloody nose to the Chinese Army when it carried out a probe in strength. Similarly at Sumdorong Cho in Arunachal Pradesh we dealt very firmly with a Chinese incursion in strength and in doing so we also passed a message to the Chinese that the Indian Army is no longer what China faced in 1962.

The most impressive of all was in the 1965 Indo-Pak War in which the Pakistanis had appealed to the Chinese to open a second front in the North East and this had caused serious concern to the Indian Army. It is to the eternal credit of the Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, that he appreciated that the Chinese always act to further their own interests and not because it serves another country such as Pakistan. No Chinese interests were involved in the 1965 war and, therefore, Shastri was of the opinion that whereas China would probably demonstrate it would not actively interfere in the war and, therefore, he told the Army that it could go ahead without worrying about a second front. His appreciation of the Chinese was brilliant and accurate. The reason for mentioning the 1965 situation is that even today India is obsessed with the fear that the Chinese at any stage could invade India's North East and that we would find it difficult to counter this because of the massive strength of China. After all, China does claim that Arunachal Pradesh is a part of China. What is surprising that whereas China indulges in cartographic warfare India scrupulously avoids this. This is one area where our policy must change. For this we need a complete rethinking on our strategic doctrine vis-à-vis China.

Let us see what are the problems which are likely to affect Sino Indian relations in future. One thing is certain and it is that India cannot even contemplate a war of continental dimension with China in which we target the Chinese mainland. In the thirties and forties of the last century China was a highly disorganised and fragmented country in which, despite the efforts of Sun Yat Sen and the Kuomintang, China was not really one nation and Sun Yat Sen's successor, Chiang Kai Shek and the Communists led by Mao Tse Tung were in a state of civil war. The Japanese exploited this fault-line and after their easy conquest of Manchuko, or Chinese Mongolia, they rapidly captured many of the urban centres of China. However, the size of the country and resistance of the Kuomintang and the Communists initially individually and subsequently in coalition, effectively foiled Japan from conquering the whole of China. Today China is unified, economically strong and with armed forces which are very large and rapidly modernising. There is no question of our attacking mainland China, nor do we have any ambitions in this behalf.

The main contact of India and China is really at the margin, or the borders. Our area of interest vis-à-vis China is directly with Tibet in the North East, or in the Ladakh frontier and mainland China to the extent that it borders on the extreme eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh near Walong. Incidentally, Walong is the sector in which the Sikh Light Infantry held the Chinese and prevented them from advancing into Indian territory. The Indian Army, despite its unpreparedness and poor equipment state, was able to hold the Chinese on a North-South axis ranging from Dambuguru, Demchok, Daulat Beg Oldi, Chushul and Pangong Tso because of good leadership. We also have interests in Xingiang, which impinges on India through Pak occupied Gilgit and the Karakorum Pass, especially because this is the sector served by the strategic highway which the Chinese have built across Aksai Chin. This is the area we have to secure so that our armed forces are capable of taking on anything the Chinese can throw at us along the North Eastern and North Western Border. In preparing the armed forces we have, therefore, to concentrate on developing the strength to ensure neutralising and deterring of any Chinese aggression in Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and Ladakh. We need not bother about developing the strength to defeat the Chinese on the Chinese mainland because that is neither possible nor necessary. This means that our armed forces must be so strong as to take on anything the Chinese can throw at us in the border region, but not necessarily designed to a total war.

We need to build a network of roads in Arunachal Pradesh, including a road which loops around its border with Tibet right from Tawang in the extreme west to Walong in the extreme east, with North South roads connecting this border highway with the rest of Arunachal Pradesh and the Brahmaputra Valley. Strategically this highway, built as close to the border as possible, would define the boundaries of India in this sector and logistically it would provide the means of moving troops and equipment up to the border in case of conflict. This is important because in this sector the Chinese are sitting on the Tibetan Plateau from which it is for them a downhill journey, whereas for India it is uphill all the way up to the Tibetan Plateau. However, in the western sector the Ladakh Plateau is at about the same height as the Tibetan Plateau and this is one sector where we can deploy armoured formations capable of rapid mobility and deep penetration into Western Tibet. We should exploit this topographical advantage. In other words, in ensuring that the Chinese learn to respect the sanctity of our borders we need to build a military capability of deterring them from any adventurism. Just as we are not interested in mainland China it is most unlikely that China is interested in debouching into the Indo-Gangetic Plain, which means that their interests are basically in border areas. If we are able to build our border defences adequately so that the Chinese give up any thought of armed conflict there that would be a sufficient battle doctrine for us vis-à-vis the Chinese. In other words, we need not be oppressively overawed by the strength of China because we have the capability of dealing with them where necessary. We also need to appreciate, as Lal Bahadur Shastri did, that the Chinese always act out of self interest, they have no concept of jihad, they have no non state actors, all their moves are deliberate and if they see their advantage in peacefully settling border disputes they would prefer this to armed conflict. This should be our ruling China doctrine and should guide us in our dealing with China.

The question then remains whether this government is in error in talking of a dialogue with Pakistan. Well, there is no harm in dialogue, provided one remembers what Theodore Roosevelt said, “When confronted by a large angry dog talk softly to him while reaching behind for the big stick”. In the dialogue it must be made clear that Kashmir is nonnegotiable and if Kashmir is the only issue that the Pakistan wants to raise then there is no scope for talks. Ideally we should move towards a position in which the border between India and Pakistan becomes open in the same manner as it is between Canada and United States. At the entry point a citizen of either nation should only have to produce proof of identity, after which he would be free to move at will in the other country and if he so desires even take up residence there. There would be freedom of trade and even for setting up enterprises in each other’s countries. This would include Kashmir. What would not be permitted is transfer of citizenship. With an open border and free movement many of the problems between the two countries would evaporate. Perhaps this will not happen overnight, but a liberalised visa regime and business protocol would be beneficial to both. Inder Gujral as Prime Minister remarked that we need not fear a liberal visa regime because in any case spies and terrorist do not enter with visas. On the one hand citizens having free access to each other’s countries would act as ambassadors of goodwill and if Pakistan did not reciprocate then the Pakistanis coming to India would go back with a positive picture of India and if their relative from India found it difficult to visit them in Pakistan, then they would become critical of the Pakistan Government, which is to India’s advantage.

All this, of course, relates to the ideal on which, frankly speaking, one suspects will not be achieved because of Pakistani intransigence. In the meantime our best policy would be to strengthen our military capability as indicated earlier in this article, simultaneously keeping the doors of dialogue open, but without a high expectation level.

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