

Creating peace in South Asia

Opinion | [Saira Bano Orakzai](#) | March 10, 2019

The people of India and Pakistan are living in tough times. The killing of 44 soldiers in the Pulwama terrorist attack in Jammu in Indian-controlled Kashmir marked the first major escalation of conflict between two countries after the Kargil war in 1999. This conflict has damaged the already fragile relations between the two countries, amidst loss of life on both sides of the Line of Control.

South Asia is at risk of dysfunctional diplomatic relations and a divisive political environment after the Indian violation of Pakistan's airspace. The goodwill gesture of the government of Pakistan to release the captured Indian air force pilot after Indian MiG-21 was shot down by the Pakistan Air Force set aside **Sun Tzu's advice in 'The Art of War' – to 'deceive and betray' as a strategic approach in state-level relations** – and opened a new avenue for peace in the South Asian region.

Peace is both a philosophical concept and a strategy to bring political interactions back to a higher and more civil and civilised level from a damaging trajectory. Approaching peace as a unilateral tactic at the state level involves diplomatic risks. Nonetheless, it gives a moral fabric and a new reality to the old self of the state. Pakistan's decision to release Wing Cdr Abhinandan shunned the usual historical approach of diplomatic bargaining for release of prisoners between the states. It also put Pakistan on an irreversible path to peace that demands channelling the country to disentangle from its past policies.

To achieve peace, we need to be skilled at creating peace in a deeply conflicted South Asian region. Both India and Pakistan are not nations that are at peace with themselves today. There is ongoing anger and divisions that need resolution. **Philosophical peace appears in the form of nonviolence, civil resistance, positive and negative peace depicting an absence of war and structural violence within a society. However, at the state level, we have to design and build peace through skilful negotiations and by avoiding diplomatic risks and mismanagement.** The Abhinandan episode can be termed as a control strategy to keep temporary peace with a unilateral hope for de-escalation in the region. However, Pakistan's boycott of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) 46th Council of Foreign Ministers session entails a change within Pakistan's postcolonial approach for engagement with other nations.

The historic pattern of diplomacy, of relying on religious affiliation, has backfired in the OIC's session where Indian's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was invited as a guest of honour, which irked Pakistan and resulted in a disengagement policy. Taking diplomatic risks at times of conflict and wars require leaders who are focused on the strategies of peace and who are skilled at creating peace. Pakistan followed a goodwill approach that was not backed by negotiations, bargaining or any concrete strategy for creating peace. This, while giving moral weight, does not necessarily lead to de-escalation – and thus involves taking higher levels of security risks in the future.

Peace is not a sign of defeat but rather is meant to avoid defeat and destruction of both parties in the conflict. The processes and patterns emerging from the Indian leadership's approach towards this conflict triggered responses to the war situation. **There was an attempt to create a win/lose set of outcomes** to exploit the ongoing weakness and vulnerability that Pakistan is facing since the events of 9/11.

Over the course of eighteen years since September 11, 2001, Pakistan followed the strategy of 'vital interests' and giving priority to dealing with terrorism and extremism amidst accusations of harbouring numerous banned terrorist outfits within the country. However, with a changed regional environment of US-Taliban engagement in Afghanistan's dialogue process, the stakes have never been higher to evaluate Pakistan's internal overall realities as a nation.

What is Pakistan's strategy for creating peace after Abhinandan's release and the diplomatic debacle at the OIC? Has Pakistan adopted situationally appropriate tactics? Are there visible intent triggers that hinder peace in this crisis? In order to analyse the present crisis in South Asia, we need to suspend conscience if we go by the approach of a harmful 'them' policy. For the last 71 years, this policy is in full swing in the region as a core reality to feel protected. This is South Asia's self-reinforcing cycle and self-perpetuating legacy. India-Pakistan's behaviours of attack, kill, bomb have created our history.



Our goodwill gesture cannot simply sweep the slate clean today. There are some functional realities of economic clout, diplomatic engagement, and continuation of terrorism narrative, which became evident in the present conflict. In the present crisis, Pakistan opted for a philosophical approach to peace, which though a diplomatic risk, signals towards changing triggers of behaviour in Pakistan's approach to the present conflict and future policy patterns.

Protecting peace, no matter how fragile, is better than peace being lost since regaining this opportunity again will be hard. Peace is intentionally determined and not to be situationally undermined. It requires peace efforts to be preceded by concrete engagement and agreements, and followed by diplomatic engagement not dis-engagements at international forums.

It is important to be aware of the risks to peace that can be easily activated in the India-Pakistan context. At present, India is not actively reciprocating to Pakistan's approach for creating peace. In this complex setting, one act of peace by Pakistan can be termed as a motivator, but is nonetheless not a sign of abandonment of the mutually destructive thinking of these two neighbours.

Negotiated terms and mutual agreements can achieve outcomes so that no party feels betrayed by the change in the status quo. Credible negotiation, standing your ground for peace and resolving conflicts through meaningful engagement can create a situation where peace is an acceptable pattern of behaviour for leaders. A region marred by poverty, conflicts, economic issues, water crisis, terrorism, extremism and other forms of such malaise needs a chance for peace – piece by piece.

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Mega Lecture