

Article Title: “Internationalise Pak villainy: Kautilya’s principles of realpolitik must replace idealism in India’s Pakistan policy”

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Visiting Washington DC earlier this month with a delegation of Indian MPs, it was astonishing to note how far that nation has moved in recognising Pakistan for what it is. Large numbers of US government officials, Congressmen, Senators, former presidential candidates and others are speaking bluntly about Pakistan.

In a far cry from its 2004 designation as a “major non-NATO ally”, many American politicians now unhesitatingly call Pakistan a duplicitous rogue state that uses terrorism as a tool of its foreign policy. While acknowledging that Pakistan has cracked down on some terrorist organisations, they lambast it for continuing to shelter those like the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammed, which target American, Afghan and Indian interests.

Several US lawmakers have gone beyond words and have taken steps to rein in Pakistan, such as by stalling US defence assistance. Other legislative manoeuvres aim to help India access restricted defence technologies. These are motivated by India’s economic growth, the influence of its successful diaspora, mutual interests and concerns about China.

Yet it is far from clear whether a pivotal moment has arrived to successfully isolate Pakistan in the eyes of the civilised world. As pointed out by Ata Hasnain, a retired Indian general and respected commentator, Pakistan’s impunity stems from its uniquely strategic geography. It has leveraged that to entice, flirt with, and blackmail the world’s leading powers into tolerating its bad behaviour.

Nevertheless, many observers have concluded that India should now unhesitatingly internationalise Pakistan’s villainy. For years India has been diffident about doing so, for fear of playing into the hands of Pakistan, which has been trying to re-internationalise the Kashmir issue despite the Shimla agreement to keep it bilateral.

But 2016 is very different from 1989, when Pakistan reneged on its Shimla commitment and turned the heat on Kashmir. Now it is amply clear that while most of the world has no interest in getting involved in India and Pakistan’s Kashmir dispute, unless war in the subcontinent is imminent, terrorism is another matter altogether.

The “root cause” theory, of terrorism being fostered by political circumstances, has lost enormous ground in recent years. And battered by a summer of ghastly jihadi terror attacks, the rest of the world now has far more empathy for India.

In any event India has to break out of the box it has been in since 1998, when Pakistan redefined the meaning of nuclear deterrence. Traditionally, the cold war dynamic of

nuclear-armed adversaries resulted in mutual restraint, lest any provocation get out of hand, leading to the ultimate “Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)”. But Pakistan has used its nuclear cover quite differently, by continually attacking India through its proxies, counting on our unilateral “strategic restraint”.

After the usual lack of any immediate military response to Uri, Pakistan may again be feeling its stratagem is justified. But that would be a mistake. Unilateral strategic restraint has had two main objectives for India: prevent Pakistan from re-internationalising the Kashmir dispute, and stay focussed on our own economic growth, rather than scare investments away with tit-for-tat jousting with an unstable neighbour.

The first is much less a concern now, but the second remains a constraint. Thus Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech in Kozhikode last Saturday was yet another example of India taking the high road. It was reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw’s famous quip to “Never wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it.”

More such messaging is necessary, aimed at the Pakistani people rather than their leadership, but will not be sufficient. It is worth trying to undo the Pakistani state’s brainwashing of its people about their own history and the vastly exaggerated threat from India. But that cannot be our only response. So how is India to break out of strategic gridlock?

South Asia experts like author and academic Christine Fair argue that India should leverage its new clout with the US, and reach out to other major actors like China, to obtain UN sanctions to ring fence terrorists operating from Pakistan. That is good advice, and to some extent is already being attempted. But it cannot yield quick results, and likely won’t be enough to eliminate terrorist attacks altogether.

Ironically, it takes a former Pakistani journalist and diplomat to articulate what few Indian or American policy wonks are willing to say bluntly. Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US and now a think tank scholar and prolific author, had this to say a few days before the Uri attack: “It seems Pakistan’s establishment will not stop using terrorism unless it pays a higher price for it than Pakistan is already paying.”

For a country with the Ashoka Stambh as its national emblem, it has taken India far too long to recollect Kautilya’s mantra of statecraft: Sama, Dana, Bheda, Danda (conciliate, compensate, divide, fight). But there are clear indications that India has now finally understood, carrots alone don’t work, sometimes sticks are necessary too.

There is unexplored headroom between responding to every terrorist attack with only words of condemnation, and the other extreme of triggering cycles of escalation leading to war. Realpolitik, not utopian principles, should guide this exploration. Covert operations, Balochistan, Indus waters, and other unthought-of options must all be on the table.