

# Idea Exchange

SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2019

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## WHY GAUTAM BAMBAWALE

The terror attack in Pulwama that killed 40 CRPF men, followed by the IAF's aerial strikes on Balakot, have led to an increase in tension between India and Pakistan. A 1984-batch Indian Foreign Service officer, Gautam Bambawale was India's High Commissioner to Pakistan in 2016 and 2017. He was in office when India undertook

surgical strikes following the terrorist attack in Uri, and when Kulbhushan Jadhav was captured by Pakistan. Bambawale was India's ambassador to China in 2018, and handled the Wuhan Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping following the Doklam stand-off

"On cricket, my own gut feeling is that just because the emotions are high, doesn't mean we stop playing cricket with Pak in an international setting... It's quite silly to lose points when we know we can beat them"



## One surgical or aerial strike may not force Pak to stop aiding terror. But we have raised the costs

Former ambassador to China and ex-high commissioner to Pakistan Gautam Bambawale says the message from the recent air strike on Balakot is that India can undertake such an exercise 'successfully', insists there is 'no deep-seated hatred' between Indians and Pakistanis, and explains why, on listing of Masood Azhar as a terrorist, India needs to be 'transactional' with China

**SHUBHAJIT ROY:** What does the decision to conduct air strikes on terrorist camps in Pakistan mean?

Pakistan has been following a policy of bleeding India by a thousand cuts. That policy is of aiding, abetting and sponsoring terrorism directed at India. We have had terrorist incidents for almost 35-40 years, not only in Jammu and Kashmir but all over India. This is a low-cost strategy for the Pakistanis.

With the (surgical strikes) for the first time in 2016, and now again in 2019, what we have indicated is that the people of India have had it up to their necks in suffering from terrorist activities. Also, we have indicated — and the government can take credit for the bold and brave decision — that if Pakistan will not control terrorists, then we will go and strike them inside Pakistan. That is what has changed. A lot of people are describing it as a new template that has been brought to the table. I agree with that assessment. It is no one's case that one surgical strike, or one aerial strike, would force Pakistan to stop aiding and abetting terrorism. But we have increased and raised the costs for them to do this.

**SHUBHAJIT ROY:** We did not incur any casualties in the air strikes, but in such situations, things can go wrong. Were we prepared for that?

There is no doubt that it was a risky operation. But a lot of people in India are now saying that look, if Pakistan is not going to stop aiding and abetting terrorism, then we must take our own steps. These people are asking questions of our government. I think this government has only answered those questions by undertaking the surgical strikes of 2016 and the aerial strikes of 2019. I am sure the people in the government would have considered all the action-reaction scenarios, and only after assessing them would have decided to go ahead with it.

**SHUBHAJIT ROY:** You were India's High Commissioner to Pakistan when the surgical strikes were carried out by ground troops in 2016. How did you engage with the Pakistanis at the time?

The situation then was slightly different from what it is now. When the surgical strikes took place, the Pakistanis decided to deny it. And then they were not forced to react to it either. Regarding the decision to carry out those strikes, there were a number of options on the table. I cannot reveal the details, but I am very confident that the same options, maybe a few more, were on the table this time as well.

Much before the surgical strikes took place, and may be even before the attack on Uri, I had a long chat with the then foreign secretary, S Jaishankar, during one of my visits to New Delhi in 2016. One of the things he told me was that there was something building up. He said he did not know what will happen or what options will the government choose, but said if some action was taken against Pakistan, one of his primary concerns was to ensure that Indians at the High Commission in Islamabad remained safe. He asked me to prepare for a situation wherein everyone working at the Indian High Commission could be locked down in a safe place. We did actually prepare for that, and when the surgical strikes took place, we spent four days locked down in a safe place within the Indian High Commission.

**AMITABH SINHA:** So the former foreign secretary mentioned that something was building up against Pakistan even before the Uri attack? Then, were the surgical strikes a strategic decision rather than a response to an attack on the Indian State?

No, I am not saying that. My limited point is that the foreign secretary had



Former ambassador Gautam Bambawale with Senior Editor Shubhajit Roy in *The Indian Express* newsroom in Pune

ARUL HORIZON

enough foresight to visualise that we may get into a situation where the safety of the people in the High Commission in Islamabad could be at stake. He said that once he did not have to worry about the safety of Indians in Islamabad, he would be free to consider all options. So it is not that we had already decided to carry out surgical strikes before Uri. No, not at all.

**AMITABH SINHA:** There has been a debate on whether the recent aerial strikes were effective. For argument's sake, if we concede that there were zero casualties, and that the strikes probably did not hit the intended targets, would you even then say that the strikes were significant for India, strategically and diplomatically?

Firstly, in such situations we are not looking at benefit or loss, or victory or defeat. We are not thinking in those terms at all. The fact on the ground is that there is a lot of terrorism emanating from Pakistan. And we want to do something to raise the costs, to dissuade the other country from exercising this kind of option. I also want to say that the military strikes did indeed happen. We can quibble over whether 25 terrorists were killed or 200. That is something that we do not know about. But I believe that the strikes took place and were successful. That is also the most important part. That is the message. The message was not that 200 people were killed. The message was that we can undertake such an exercise to attack terrorist bases and infrastructure. And I think that message has been sent not just to the world but even to Pakistan.

**ANURADHA MASCARENHAS:** India wants to isolate Pakistan, but there is a SAARC summit that is due, and it has to be held in Islamabad. Do you think it will happen?

The SAARC summit has been due for some time. Pakistan is the next host. But we are not sure when it will happen. There are at least a few of us in the region — India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan — four out of eight members,

who believe that this is not the right time to hold the SAARC summit.

**PARTHA SARATHI BISWAS:** China has been restrained in its response to the aerial strikes by India. What do you make of it?

The situation is not easy for China. From their perspective, terrorism is an issue that they realise is a problem across the world, including in China. The Chinese position on terrorism is very clear — they oppose it in all its forms and manifestations. On the other hand, they have this very close, tight strategic, economic, military relationship with Pakistan. Whatever they said at the time could also be due to the fact that our Foreign Minister was scheduled to go to China (for the Russia-India-China meeting). They were a little worried that she may cancel if they push too much. But the kind of reaction that came from the Chinese, even from the RIC meeting, I would say, is a step forward. It is much better for India than it has been in the past.

On the specific issue of listing of Masood Azhar as a terrorist, I think we need to be transactional with China. If there is something that we can do for China — say at the UN, there is an important election where they want us to vote for them — we should ask for a quid pro quo. I say this because last year when the grey listing of Pakistan took place at the Financial Action Task Force meeting, we were able to do this kind of transactional

bargain with the Chinese. I think we can do it again. The timing is right. There is enough momentum internationally to get him listed.

**MANOJ MORE:** What do you make of the hatred that is portrayed between India and Pakistan? What is it like on the ground? Should we be playing cricket with them?

I don't think there is a deep-seated hatred for Indians among Pakistanis. The problem is that this terrorism, which is aided, abetted, supported, financed, by Pakistan, is bleeding us. That is the main thing that people in India would want to be stopped. You can discuss all kinds of things — music, literature — with Pakistanis very easily, but the moment it comes to bilateral issues there is a difference of opinion. It is because there is too much emotion involved, and it goes back to the times of Partition.

On cricket, my own gut feeling is that just because the emotions are high, doesn't mean that we stop playing cricket with Pakistan in an international setting. There is the World Cup (later this year). If we don't play, we will lose points. I think it is quite silly to lose points when we know we can beat them.

**MANOJ MORE:** Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said he had tried to speak to PM Modi. Do you think the Indian PM should talk to his counterpart in Pakistan?

If you look at the entire episode (aerial strikes by India), the big takeaway is that the international community stood by India's right to self-defence. That is where we have won in this messaging war



OIC, and this is a recognition of the facts on the ground. At the same time, we should not think that suddenly the OIC has changed its position completely. This is a process. And it is a process that will unfold in the next 15-20 years. Our participation in the OIC is a turning point, an important inflection point in our relations with West Asia and Islamic countries.

**AJAY KHAPE:** Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was released very soon, in about 48 hours...

According to the Geneva Convention, they would have had to release him at some point in time. I think the way it must have happened is that Prime Minister Imran Khan might have said that if we have to release him after a few days, why not give him up today and claim credit for it. I hope that is what has happened because it then means that he has been able to convince the military authorities in Pakistan to do this. That is relatively a good thing. I think it was a goodwill gesture, even if it came under international pressure.

**AMITABH SINHA:** Pakistan started the 'nuclear' talk on the first day after the strikes. They had a nuclear command meeting as well but probably decided not to go any further. So, their nuclear threshold is probably not as low as many in India thought?

They would have a threshold. I don't know what it is. Maybe people in government have a better idea. I don't think it is as easy to cross the nuclear threshold.

**SHUBHAJIT ROY:** How have you handled the case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, whom Pakistan has accused of being an Indian spy?

I want to make only two points. Firstly, it is incumbent on any government that has signed or is party to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to give consular access, and till today, Pakistan has not given it to us. Our whole case at the International Court of Justice is this — that you have an international law that provides for consular access and these guys have not given it. The second point is that when a military court undertakes a hearing, we don't know what happens. We don't know whether there was anyone to defend him. So that sort of proceeding is bad in law, and hopefully will be turned down by any international court.

**SUSHANT KULKARNI:** There is also a perception battle being fought after the aerial strikes.

If you look at the entire episode, you will see the big takeaway is that the entire international community stood by India's right to self-defence. I think that is the big picture and that is where we have won in this messaging war.

**SHUBHAJIT ROY:** There have been three incidents of stand-off with China in recent years. How has the approach of India changed?

You have to factor in the fact that India and China not only do not have a common boundary but we don't even have a common line of control. When you add to that the fact that both sides have better technology, better roads, better communication... What is beginning to happen is that the militaries of India and China, which used to be fairly far apart, are now coming closer to each other. Both India and China are also conscious not to push the envelope.

**SHUBHAJIT ROY:** The informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China's President Xi Jinping in Wuhan last year was dubbed as agenda-less...

We decided that after the confrontation at Doklam, it was important to keep talking to each other. Both countries were able to talk to each other through diplomatic channels. And we agreed to have an informal summit between the leaders. The two leaders spent about eight to 10 hours together. In a formal setting, meetings usually don't last for more than an hour or so. They were able to cover a lot of topics... It helped clear the air, clear the misunderstandings. It was not an agenda-less meeting. Certain topics were agreed for talks. They covered that and much more.

Informal summits are probably a new diplomatic template that has been introduced. Later this year, when the elections are over, I think the Chinese President will visit India for an informal summit.