

India: “Politicizing Terrorism” in Order to Pressure China

Masood Azhar and Dolkan Isa

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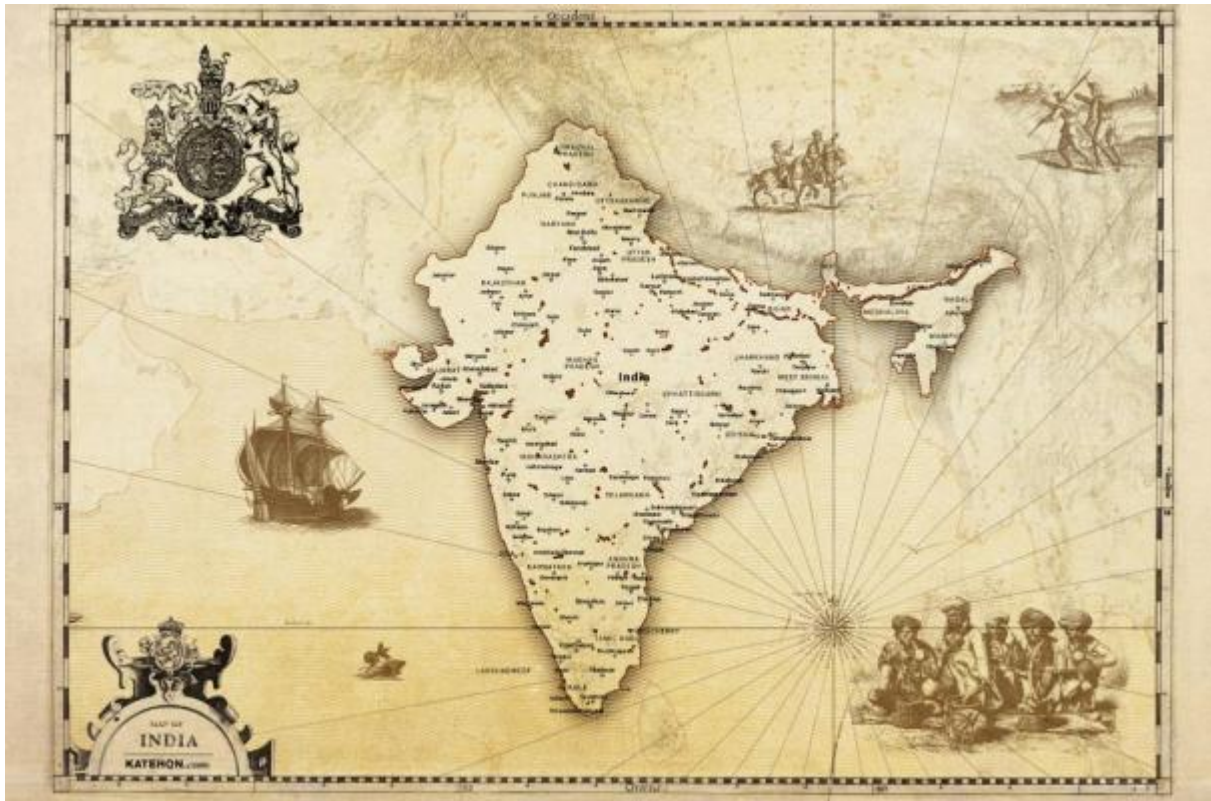
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Terrorism is an issue that’s usually taken quite seriously in India, which makes it all the more surprising that its ruling establishment has taken to politicizing it in order to pressure China. A rather curious event transpired this week when India extended an electronic visa to Uighur separatist leader and accused terrorist Dolkan Isa but then quickly rescinded its decision a couple of days later after China protested. He was invited into the country to attend a large gathering of anti-Chinese groups in the northern city of Dharamsala, apparently in response to India’s consternation with China’s successful efforts at blocking a UN discussion about suspected Pathankot mastermind Masood Azhar.

India’s sudden policy reversal was an uncharacteristic act of diplomatic clumsiness and revealed a lot about its bungling strategic calculi, which is ultimately attributable to the internal power struggle that’s going on behind the scenes in New Delhi between advocates of the unipolar and multipolar worlds.

The present article uses the interconnected case studies of Masood Azhar and Dolkan Isa to demonstrate how New Delhi has politicized terrorism in attempting to hammer a split in the Chinese-Pakistani Strategic Partnership.

It begins by explaining the ulterior motive that India had in mind when it sought to internationalize the Pathankot issue with Pakistan. Afterwards, it details how India sought to deceptively present its visa issuance to Isa as “fighting fire with fire” against China in order to ‘legitimize’ its preplanned asymmetrical aggression. Finally, the last part of the piece shows how India has backtracked in symbolism only by still deciding to go forward with hosting the multitude of anti-Chinese groups, and how this conclusively proves that New Delhi has decisively pivoted towards the unipolar world.



Premeditated Internationalization

India fell victim to a terrorist attack against its Pathankot air force base at the beginning of January, and it's been demanding justice for what happened ever since then. New Delhi accused Masood Azhar of being the mastermind behind the operation and called on Islamabad to extradite him to India. Pakistan of course refused, but instead of India treating this like the bilateral problem that it actually is and such similar situations always have been up until this point, New Delhi internationalized the dispute by involving the UN. It called upon the global body to designate Azhar a terrorist, which would then force Pakistan to hand him over or face multilateral sanctions.

The narrative is convincing – India's archrival Pakistan is harboring a terrorist that it refuses to extradite, and New Delhi must therefore ask the international community to pressure Islamabad so that justice can ultimately be served. The problem, however, is that the situation just isn't that misleadingly simple. The author wants to clearly state that he's not defending the crimes that Azhar is being accused of, but merely showing how the suspected terrorist is being exploited by India as a political instrument against China. New Delhi and Islamabad have always been at each other's throats since independence, so it's no surprise that one or the other would resort to uncouth measures against their chief competitor – and again, the author is not justifying this on either end. But what's new in this dynamic is how India has now tried to turn its bilateral problems with Pakistan into a form of asymmetrical weaponry against China.

India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is obviously well aware of the strength of the Chinese-Pakistani Strategic Partnership, particularly as it's embodied in the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through contested Kashmir, so it can't plead ignorance in claiming that it didn't think that Beijing would block New Delhi's UN move about Azhar. Instead, observers must look at India's decision to internationalize this bilateral issue with Pakistan as a purposeful provocation that was premeditated to put China in a challenging strategic position. The idea was to give China a binary choice – sell out one of its oldest and

most trusted allies and sacrifice the strategic partnership, or defend Pakistan and fall victim to India's preplanned information attack that Beijing is also "defending terrorism". China never interferes in the domestic political process of any country, let alone its chief partner Pakistan, so staying true to its international values, it expectedly refused to give in to India's 'normative' blackmail and resolutely blocked New Delhi's proposal at the UN.

Fighting Fire With Fire?

China's refusal to go along with India's premeditated internationalization of the bilateral Azhar problem that it has with Pakistan triggered New Delhi's preplanned escalatory "response". Having already anticipated how Beijing would respond, New Delhi waited a little bit and then leaked to the press that it issued an electronic visa to Dokun Isa, one of the leaders of the US-based "World Uighur Congress" separatist organization and an accused terrorist that's even on Interpol's Red Corner Notice. India's social and mainstream media frenziedly supported their government upon hearing of the audacious announcement, with regular Twitter users aggressively boasting that "#ModiSlapsChina" and more official outlets arguing that this was a "tit-for-tat" measure in response to Beijing's policy towards Azhar. A strong effort was expended across all media platforms to promote the message that India was only doing this because China had 'started it', and the high level of coordination that was unmistakably observed during this brief period of time suggests that this was a state-supported information campaign.

The whole purpose behind this operation was to give India a cover of 'plausible deniability' for when it would inevitably be accused of aggressively pursuing an enhanced anti-Chinese policy. The reader should bear in mind that India just hosted US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and agreed in principle to the so-called "Logistics Support Agreement", a euphemism for indefinitely rotating American troops out of India's air, land, and sea bases on a case-by-case basis and stationing them within operational proximity to China's Tibetan and Yunnan borders. The author wrote about the implications of this and more in a recent article for the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, and it's suggested that the reader peruse it in order to acquire a more detailed situational understanding about India's unipolar policy pivot. The reason that this is being brought up at the moment is because the timing of Isa's visa announcement coincides with the week after Carter left India, sparking educated speculation about whether this entire incident was coordinated with the US as part of a secret American-Indian strategy against China. It could be that New Delhi and Washington expected Beijing to respond in a manner which could be distortedly reported on by them as "hostile" and thus be used to 'legitimize' a more publicly presentable strategic relationship between them, in effect turning the entire Chinese-Indian Himalayan border region into a mainland version of the South China Sea and 'rationalizing' the "Logistics Support Agreement" after the fact.

Additionally, try as the Indian side might, its information operations against China were not as successful as they may have hoped in convincing the world that New Delhi was simply 'fighting fire with fire' against Beijing. There's a chasm of difference between China refusing to allow a UN motion to proceed and India inviting an accused terrorist on to its territory to take part in a large gathering of similarly antagonistic and violent anti-Chinese groups. In fact, even hosting that meeting in the first place is a major escalation of the Chinese-Indian Cold War that the author investigated late last year. If observers spend the time to actually conduct a sober comparison of China's passively benign diplomatic action and India's proactive hostility in going out of its way to organize such a meeting and invite such a high-profile terrorist front man to personally attend, they'll realize that India had actually cooked

this scheme up long ago and that the entire Azhar affair is nothing more than a convenient distraction to cover its tracks.

The Charade

In a move that no one could have expected, India reversed its decision about Isa almost as quickly as it made it and before the anti-China information campaign could reach its anticipated climax. This puzzling change of heart wasn't planned, but is symptomatic of the extreme schizophrenia that's wracking the Indian establishment at the moment. The country is torn between two competing factions – those which want India to align with the US against Pakistan and China, and the ones which favor a bold break with the past and the beginning of an entirely new era of multipolar relations within BRICS and the SCO. The unipolar camp is responsible for issuing Isa's visa, leaking the information to the press, and managing the anti-Chinese information campaign, while the multipolar one seems to have somehow pulled the right levers behind the scene and got the Ministry of External Affairs to walk back its shameful decision.

This institutional split between pro-American unipolar elements and pro-multipolar BRICS/SCO ones didn't just come to the surface because of the Azhar-Isa scandal, but was on bloody display for nearly half a year while India blockaded Nepal (a charge which it officially denied) and emboldened the violent terror of its ethnic Madhesi kin. The author wrote in October how this marked a new stage in the Chinese-Indian Cold War (one which was briefly overshadowed by the Maldives), and the essence of the rivalry boiled down to India over-imposing itself as it has typically done on its northern neighbor, except this time it went too far by trying to gerrymander its planned federal units. While there certainly were preexisting ethnic and regional conflicts in Nepal before all of this happened, India's short-sighted policy of hegemonic dominance dramatically backfired and took the country to the brink of civil war. Although this was averted due to a series of political compromises on all sides, the 'collateral damage' that this created was that China had for the first time in its history broke India's strategic stranglehold on Nepal and emerged as a competing rival there.

Never before had Indian policy been so careless than it had been in Nepal, nor had it ever resulted in such a stunning strategic defeat as had happened over the past half a year. The Ministry of External Affairs had spent years cultivating a hard-won and highly respected reputation across the world as being a bastion of wisdom and caution, and its diplomats were never known to make such reckless moves. While initially writing off such an experience as freak occurrence, the author now believes that when it's seen in the immediate continuum of the subsequent Azhar-Isa scandal, that it's possible to see shades of distinct American influence over India's foreign policy. New Delhi would never have behaved so aggressively in Nepal had it not been for a trusted external actor 'advising' it to do so, nor would it have plotted something as Machiavellian as using the internationalization of the Azhar scandal to 'justify' the Isa provocation against China. These two examples defy Indian political tradition and indicate that a secondary force is exerting strong influence on its establishment and pressing it to make these uncharacteristic decisions. This "x" factor is none other than the US, and the degree of strategic collaboration between the two sides was on public display when Carter visited India a few weeks ago and announced that "The American-Indian relationship is one that will define the 21st century."

Having exposed the covert leadership role that the US has recently acquired over India's foreign policy, it's now relevant to turn back to the Dharmasala gathering that Isa was

supposed to attend. This event is organized by the US-based “Initiatives For China” and brings together a multitude of ethnic and political terrorist groups. Its purpose is to provide a platform for multilateral coordination in devising anti-Chinese policies, and it’s shocking that India would ever agree to let such a gathering be hosted on its soil. But then again, in hindsight, it couldn’t be more natural if one accepts the thesis that the US is largely controlling India’s foreign policy at this point. Washington wants nothing more than to intensify the Cold War between New Delhi and Beijing and set both Asian Great Powers on the trajectory of mutually assured strategic destruction in order to stymie the SCO and sabotage the New Silk Road projects through Pakistan. Looked at in this manner, then the presumed ‘victory’ that the multipolar camp was thought to have celebrated in getting Isa’s visa revoked actually turns out to be nothing more than a charade, since it in effect didn’t change anything when it comes to New Delhi’s hosting of the anti-Beijing insurgent meeting and India’s potential support for their future activities. While it’s possible that friendly multipolar forces did pull off a victory of sorts in pushing back against the unipolar pro-American establishment that has seized control of India, their actions weren’t enough to effect tangible change and put the brakes on India’s strategic collision course with China.

Concluding Thoughts

India was earlier thought of as an indispensable member of BRICS, but recent events are proving that its loyalty to what was assumed to have been the shared vision of multipolarity is in serious question. India’s emulation of aggressive American strategy vis-à-vis Nepal and the Western-like Machiavellian cunning that it displayed in plotting the Azhar-Isa scandal against China are causes of serious concern. Furthermore, the visit of US Secretary of Defense Carter just a few weeks ago, the promise to sign the “Logistics Service Agreement” and cooperate on building India’s first-ever domestically produced aircraft carrier, and India’s overall realignment towards the US raises the question of whether India could even be regarded as being in the multipolar camp anymore or not.

Looking back on it, it seems as though India was never a fully pledged multipolar partner, anyhow. Granted, it’s taken strong steps in pursuing economic multipolarity through the BRICS New Development Bank and has made commendable progress in promoting the institutional principles of BRICS as a whole, but what it’s always sorely lacked was an unwavering commitment to geopolitical multipolarity. The rivalry with Pakistan has become such an obsession that many decision makers in the Indian establishment appear to only see everything as a zero-sum game between New Delhi and Islamabad. Coupled with the newfound obsession in “containing China”, inspired by the ‘friendly guidance’ of American strategists and the incessant fear mongering that unipolar-controlled Indian media outlets have been ginning up, India can’t currently countenance having any pragmatic relations with either of them because of the unrealistically high strategic security dilemma that’s been artificially created.

Even worse from the perspective of India’s elite, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will have to traverse through contested Pakistani-administered territory that New Delhi officially claims as its own, causing a panicked hysteria among the decision-making adherents of the zero-sum doctrine that China and Pakistan are ‘teaming up’ against India. Under these extreme conditions of American-manufactured “reactionary nationalism”, it’s very difficult for any genuine multipolar influences to gain a foothold inside of India’s present establishment, let alone to have their pragmatic ideas be heard without being accused of near-treason. Although it’s possible that they somehow managed to pull off their minor symbolic victory in having Isa’s visa rescinded, they didn’t make a dent in convincing the

establishment of the need to cancel the anti-China insurgent meeting in Dharamsala and pulling out all support for these terrorist groups.

Right now, the prospects look regrettably dim that sincere multipolar influences will make a comeback in the Indian establishment anytime soon, so it's in the grand strategic interests of Russia and China to thenceforth regard everything that India does with the utmost of suspicion and begin painfully asking themselves whether the US has in fact succeeded in turning the South Asian giant into a Trojan Horse for sabotaging BRICS, the SCO, and the emerging multipolar world order in general.

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