Need for Conflict De-escalation Mechanisms - India & Pakistan

What is the issue?

- India and Pakistan was at a near stand-off following the recent Pulwama terror strike.
- This calls for assessing the effectiveness of communication channels between them as a conflict management mechanism.

Why is communication crucial at war times?

- Talking to one's adversary in the midst of a war, a limited war or even hostility is often viewed as undesirable in the public mind.
- But the long history of warfare and India's own experience in dealing with past crises has proved otherwise.
- Talking to one's adversaries is a crucial requirement for de-escalation and for bringing the two sides back from the brink.
- Such talks are often done cautiously and diplomatically via the 'back channel', away from media attention.
- It focusses on de-escalation, meeting the aims behind the war-talk and achieving an honourable exit from the tussle.
- E.g. during the Kargil conflict, politically appointed interlocutors had conducted discreet discussions on de-escalatory measures
- Even the two Cold War rivals had to keep talking to each other through the worst years of their rivalry to de-escalate tensions.

What happened after the Pulwama incident?

- In the recent Pulwama terror strike on a CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) convoy, nearly 40 security personnel were killed.
- Following this, there was a military encounter between India and Pakistan. Click here to know more.
- As learnt, there were hardly any pre-existing/dedicated channels of communication between the two countries then.

Why was there a communication breakdown?

- For the most part of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) -I and II

governments, there was an established mechanism.
- Backchannel conversations took place by special envoys appointed by the respective Prime Ministers.
- But the current Bharatiya Janata Party-led government decided to discontinue that time-tested and useful practice.
- So there were apparently no back-channel contacts between India and Pakistan during the above-mentioned crisis.
- Also, the ones that were in place were not put to use too.
- The conversation at the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) level is the highest military contact that currently exists between India and Pakistan.
- It has often played a de-escalatory role, but it was not activated during the crisis.
- Pakistan did not have a National Security Adviser (NSA) or an equivalent official.
- So unlike previous years, there were no NSA-level talks either.
- The two High Commissioners were too called back to their home countries for consultations.
- It is during crisis periods that envoys should stay put in their respective High Commissions.
- This would help find ways of defusing tensions and relaying messages and options back to their governments.
- Unfortunately, India and Pakistan chose to do the exact opposite.
- In all, very little bilateral conversation actually took place to de-escalate the crisis.

What are the risks involved?

- In the absence of bilateral conflict de-escalation mechanisms, the nuclear-armed countries could head towards serious conflict.
- Perhaps, the government wanted to keep decision-making during the crisis in its sphere, to ensure maximum political mileage from it.
- India might have chosen to not communicate for the political utility of the 'teaching Pakistan a lesson' rhetoric.
- But it is to be noted that when the hostile parties do not talk to de-escalate tensions, others tend to step in.
- Outsourcing conflict management to third parties, especially in the absence of one's own mechanisms, is likely to lead to disaster.

What does it call for?

- New Delhi and Islamabad must keep lines of communication open at all times, especially during crisis times.

- There is a need to reinstate/re-establish high-level backchannel contacts with interlocutors in Pakistan.
- The two sides should also urgently put in place dedicated bilateral conflict de-escalation mechanisms.

Source: The Hindu

