

DECODING INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

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Diplomats and practitioners of international relations work towards predictable and rational behaviour. While the definition of rational is inherently subjective, that of predictability is not. Even if the interlocutor's actions are not rational, welcome and beneficial, if they are predictable—or exist within a broad and given matrix of options—a state can live with them and learn to respond to them.

For the past decade, India-Pakistan relations have followed a certain predictability. This is not to suggest there have been no crises or black swan moments – such as the dramatic terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008—but the governments, the two establishments and the foreign-policy infrastructures have largely learnt to gauge each other.

The limits of civilian autonomy in Pakistan; the red lines no government in New Delhi has crossed even after serious terrorist attacks with Pakistani fingerprints; India's preoccupation with its economy having reduced the older obsession with its western neighbour; the gradual (hope of) opening up of bilateral trade, especially trade between bordering provinces; the growing challenges to the Pakistani state from domestic jihadists and from the post 9/11 power balance in Afghanistan; the relative decline in infiltration across the Line of Control (LoC): in some form or the other, these have been constants in the past decade.

Underpinning this predictability has been the American-led military presence in Afghanistan and Washington DC's historically deepest engagement with the security of the region. Even if neither country admitted it, this made the United States a guarantor of safe conduct in the subcontinent.

However, these constants were being tested even by the beginning of 2014. As such, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government took charge at a transitional juncture in South Asia. That transition is still an ongoing one and it will be some time—as least a year, well after the conclusion of the American draw down from Afghanistan—before a new normal becomes clear. In the interim, many of the verities of the past decade will continue to be undone. Modi's election itself was an element of this change, but of course not the only one.

It is important to keep this background in mind while attempting to answer questions related to Modi's Pakistan policy. For India, the diffused power structure in Pakistan, the crumbling of the civilian government, the battle with and yet attempted incorporation of factions of the Pakistan Taliban by the Pakistani state, the backseat driving of the army—evident during the street protests in Islamabad led by Imran Khan and Tahir-ul-Qadri—and most recently the intensified attacks at the LoC pose a strategic unpredictability.

To be fair, Pakistan has its own puzzles to decipher. For Islamabad, Modi's actions and messages since he took charge on May 26, 2014, represent a tactical unpredictability. The new prime minister has made grand gestures, such as inviting his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, to his swearing-in ceremony. He has taken strong action—stronger than any Indian government in the 21st century it could be argued—to hostile stimuli such as the shelling across the LoC and the international border. The Modi government agreed to foreign secretary level talks—after a considerable delay it may be added—and then cancelled these following the meeting of Pakistani diplomats with leaders of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference.

To Modi's mind, he is being consistent—sending an overt message of peace and goodwill but warning he has to product-differentiate himself from his predecessor government and will need to be seen as that much tougher on national security. He is also setting new baseline rules for engagement, particularly engagement related to Kashmir.

It is possible he will get his way and the regular meeting of Pakistani officials and politicians with Hurriyat functionaries, especially on the eve of a summit or set of talks with India, will become a thing of the past. It is also obvious that a relatively peaceful and free and fair assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir is a priority for Modi. His immediate predecessors—Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2002 and Manmohan Singh in 2008—delivered such a democratic process; so must he.

There is a perception in the government that Pakistani flirtation with the Hurriyat and the aggression at the LoC is directed at making this winter's election that much more difficult. In part, this explains the Modi government's response. The Jammu and Kashmir election is more of a legacy issue for Modi than international observers may realise. It is part of a meaningful grappling with domestic dimensions of the problems of the state—including but not limited to relations between New Delhi and the Valley—that the BJP believes it can and must focus on.

To an extent this is a reaction to what Modi's counsellors consider Manmohan Singh's inordinate obsession with the external dimensions of the Kashmir problem and his quest for a settlement with Pakistan. While interlocutors and back-channel negotiators did make much progress in the period between 2004 and 2007, there is little chance the BJP will pick up that thread, at least in the near future. Rather, Modi would want to invest in building political constituencies for India in the Valley and to that extent strengthen New Delhi's bargaining capacity pending a defining agreement with Pakistan.

Having said that, much of what Modi has demonstrated or is giving indications of—the invitation to Sharif, the cancellation of the foreign secretaries' talks, the stress on a "good" election in Jammu and Kashmir, an honest and politically feasible conversation with the Valley, the message that an attack or assault traced back to Pakistan, whether to informal, non-formal or quasi-formal sources, will result in a forceful counter-move—is still at the level of events, projected events and episodic imperatives. It does not as yet suggest a wider strategy or, to use that old cliché, an endgame.

It is likely Modi does not sense the need for an endgame. A clue to his foreign policy may lie in his economic and developmental policies in Gujarat, where he was chief minister till earlier this year, and his general approach to domestic politics. He believes in throwing several balls into the air, initiating many ventures and projects, waiting to see which will bear fruit and then allowing the logic of an endgame to recommend itself. In this he brings to the table a practitioner's pragmatism, even a cautious gambler's instinct. He is less concerned with a textbook template.

It follows he would look at Pakistan in just such a manner. He is waiting for events to unfold and sort themselves out in the coming year—as Afghanistan settles (unsettles?) into a post-American future, as a new power equation emerges in Pakistan and, crucially, as the Indian economy begins to improve and gives Modi that much more leverage vis-à-vis both Pakistan and third countries that have influence or instruments in Pakistan.

In short, Modi is playing the waiting game and on Pakistan at least his instinct is not towards proactive, clutter-buster moves. In that sense, the invitation to Nawaz Sharif in May was the swallow that did not make the summer. ❀