

MODI 3.0 AND THE FUTURE OF INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



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On 9 June 2024, Mr. Narendra Modi took oath as India's Prime Minister for the third consecutive term. Mr. Modi is the second Prime Minister of India to win consecutive third term after Jawaharlal Nehru.¹ Apart from other invited guests, the ceremony was attended by leaders from South Asia and other states including Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina; President of Sri Lanka Ranil Wickremesinghe; Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal; Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu; Prime Minister of Bhutan Tshering Tobgay; Seychelles Vice-President Ahmed Afif; and Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth.² No invitation was extended to Pakistan. If anything, the absence of any representative from Pakistan is illustrative of the likely trajectory of India-Pakistan relations in the coming years.

Modi's Policy towards Pakistan

In order to talk about the future trajectory of India-Pakistan relations, a peek into the last ten years of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule under Narendra Modi -- with a particular reference to his policies towards Pakistan -- is essential.

¹ Sheikh Saaliq, 'Modi Is Sworn in for a Third Term as India's Prime Minister', *TIME*, 9 June 2024, <https://time.com/6986973/modi-is-sworn-in-for-a-rare-third-term-as-indias-prime-minister/>.

² 'Modi 3.0: Leaders of 7 Neighbouring Nations Attend Swearing in Ceremony', *Hindustan Times*, 9 June 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/modi-3-0-leaders-of-7-neighbouring-nations-attend-swearing-in-ceremony-101717943598955.html>.

India and Pakistan share a difficult relationship marked by three full-scale wars and at least two near-war situations interspersed with short phases of relative peace. This difficult relationship saw a nosedive after the arrival of BJP at the helm of affairs in New Delhi under the leadership of Mr. Modi in 2014. The BJP's strong anti-Pakistan sentiment during the election campaign in 2014 was seen in Pakistan as part of electoral rhetoric. Initially, there was some glimmer of hope as the then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was invited to Mr. Modi's oath-taking ceremony. In addition, Modi's announcement of 'neighbourhood first' policy was viewed as indicating some possible positive forward movement in relations with Pakistan. But all such hopes soon vanished into thin air as first India abruptly called off a meeting between the Foreign Secretaries of the two countries when the Pakistan High Commissioner held a routine consultation meeting with the APHC leadership.³

Later, India's insistence on resuming dialogue process on its own terms and conditions with particular focus on alleged cross-border terrorism, increased violations of ceasefire understanding not only on the Line of Control (LOC)⁴ but also on Working Boundary, India's claims of carrying out 'surgical strike' following an attack in Uri (IIOJK), and, finally, boycotting the 19th SAARC summit that was to be held in Islamabad in 2016⁵ brought the relationship to its lowest point. During those turbulent years, Pakistan also arrested a serving Navy Commander Kulbhushan Jadhav working for Indian intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) from Balochistan in 2016. Jadhav had confessed that he was tasked to carry out sabotage activities inside Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan province and against the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁶

When India was gearing up for its 17th Lok Sabha elections in 2019, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan expressed the view that the BJP's victory could increase chances of improvement of relations between India and Pakistan including a settlement on Jammu & Kashmir dispute.⁷ This optimism was expressed almost two months after the two countries had nearly reached a point of fighting their fourth full-scale war, following India's 'airstrike' in Balakot after the Pulwama attack by a local Kashmiri in which 40 CRPF personnel lost their lives. Pakistan gave a befitting response to India's irresponsible military adventurism through its 'Operation Swift Retort'.

³ 'India Calls off Foreign Secretary Level Talks with Pakistan', *Dawn*, 18 August 2014, sec. Pakistan, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1126123>.

⁴ Pervez Majeed, 'War in Peacetime: Need for a Renewed Indo-Pak Ceasefire Agreement', *South Asian Voices*, 20 March 2018, <https://southasianvoices.org/war-during-peacetime-the-need-for-a-renewed-ceasefire-agreement/>.

⁵ 'Saarc Summit in Pakistan Postponed after Member States Pull Out', *DAWN.COM*, 28 September 2016, sec. world, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1286684>.

⁶ Mohammad.zafar, "'RAW Officer' Arrested in Balochistan', *The Express Tribune*, 24 March 2016, sec. News, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1072455/terror-purge-forces-nab-indian-spy-in-balochistan>.

⁷ 'PM Khan Sees Better Chance of Peace Talks with India If Modi's BJP Wins Election', *DAWN*, 9 April 2019, sec. world, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1474973>.

Still, the Modi-led BJP waged a strong anti-Pakistan electoral campaign hinged on 'Balakot strike' through the help of a pliant media, which never highlighted India's losses following Pakistan's counter strikes including the capture of Indian pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan.⁸ Still, it was felt in Pakistan that once elections are over in India, the situation would improve and both the countries would find their way to the negotiating table. However, these hopes were again dashed to the ground when, capitalising on a strong anti-Pakistan wave that it mobilized through a carefully orchestrated campaign, the BJP won 303 seats in Lok Sabha (way beyond its own expectations) and completely changed its tone as well as disposition on engagement with Pakistan.

Instead of finding a permanent settlement of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, India in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, international law, and bilateral agreements, decided to further tighten its grip on the disputed territory by abrogating Article 370 and 35A and bifurcate the state into two Union Territories. Of these, abrogation of Article 35A is of particular concern as now, non-Kashmiris from different parts of India are being encouraged and enabled to permanently settle in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Hence, India commenced implementing a sinister design to change the demography of IIOJK and convert Muslim majority into a minority in its own land. This way, if plebiscite is conducted under the United Nations (UN) auspices, the results could be manipulated in India's favour. Additionally, revocation of Article 35A and efforts at the demographic change are equally a frontal attack on Kashmiri identity and culture. The brutal crackdown on the people of occupied Kashmir and massive human rights violations not only caught the attention of local Indian media but were also widely reported by the international media. For its part, Pakistan maintained that India's illegal and unilateral actions of 5 August 2019 had vitiated the environment and the onus was on India to take steps to create a conducive environment for constructive engagement and result-oriented dialogue process. This included reversing the actions taken by India on August 5, 2019.

Knowing well that its case is weak after reneging on its commitment to implement the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, India has also resisted third party mediation. For years, it kept fallaciously arguing to the world that the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is a 'bilateral' matter and, therefore, there is no role for any third party. Even this Indian stance has changed in the last ten years. The Modi government now vehemently argues that the Jammu and Kashmir is an 'internal'

⁸ 'Indian Pilot Captured in Pakistan Becomes Face of Escalating Conflict', *The News*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/438060-indian-pilot-captured-in-pakistan-becomes-face-of-escalating-conflict>.

matter,⁹ a stance unambiguously rejected by the international community when the UN Security Council took up this matter thrice after 5 August 2019.

The BJP's aggressive posture did not stop at IIOJK. Driven by the 'Hindutva' ideology and their yearning for 'Akhand Bharat', senior BJP Ministers have expressed the intention of taking Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) region by force. In fact, New Delhi has repeatedly said that India would only discuss so-called 'PoK' - Gilgit- Baltistan (GB) and AJK, with Pakistan in any future negotiations.¹⁰ Notably, the Indian Parliament had adopted a resolution on 22 February 1994 where it demanded that Pakistan vacate what India terms as its territory of Jammu and Kashmir. It was only under the Modi government that repeated threats have been made about taking back GB and AJK even if it may require military action. In March 2023, Lt Governor of IIOJK Manoj Sinha was quoted as saying that India was bound by the 1994 resolution to take back Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. He went on to express his hope that one day, the dream of 'Akhand Bharat' will be realised.¹¹

In 2019, the EU DisinfoLab also exposed 265 bogus media outlets that were being managed by an Indian influence network with the purpose of not only maligning but also internationally isolating Pakistan for the past 15 years.¹² Throughout its tenure in the government, BJP led by Mr. Modi had repeatedly expressed their desire to make sure "complete isolation of Pakistan."¹³ The report by DisinfoLab titled 'India Chronicles' removed any doubt about Indian intentions regarding Pakistan. Indian belligerence towards Pakistan can also be gauged from the fact that in the past few months, India has carried out a number of extra-judicial and extra-territorial killings inside Pakistan, mostly of Kashmiris. Pakistan has raised this issue internationally, while similar instances of actual and attempted assassinations of Sikh leaders and activists were reported by Canada and the U.S.

⁹ 'Jammu and Kashmir: Kashmir, A 370 India's Internal Matter: Prasad', 12 October 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/kashmir-a-370-indias-internal-matter-prasad/articleshow/71556582.cms?from=mdr>.

¹⁰ 'Now India Will Only Discuss PoK with Pakistan: Rajnath Singh', India Today, 18 August 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/now-india-will-discuss-only-pok-with-pakistan-rajnath-singh-1581954-2019-08-18>.

¹¹ Fayaz Wani, 'India Bound by 1994 Parliament Resolution to Reclaim PoK: J&K Lt Governor Manoj Sinha', *The New Indian Express*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/Mar/07/india-bound-by-1994-parliament-resolution-to-reclaim-pok-jk-lt-governor-manoj-sinha-2553894.html>.

¹² Alexandre Alaphilippe et al., 'Uncovered: 265 Coordinated Fake Local Media Outlets Serving Indian Interests', EU DisinfoLab, 26 November 2019, <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/uncovered-265-coordinated-fake-local-media-outlets-serving-indian-interests/>.

¹³ 'Pulwama Attack : India will 'completely isolate' Pakistan,' *BBC News*, 15 February 2019, [bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47249133](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47249133)

Going Forward

A glance back at the last ten years of BJP rule in India does not offer an encouraging picture regarding the prospects of India-Pakistan relations, at least in the near future. In order to win elections, the BJP's most preferred and successful tactic has been 'Pakistan bashing'. From promising to pursue a 'muscular policy' against Pakistan if elected in 2014 to the 'false flag operation' in Pulwama and its mantra '*Ghar me ghus ke maareng*' (we will hit you inside your home) throughout its election campaign in 2019, the Indian government brought the two countries almost to the brink of a full-scale war.

The BJP's tactics did not change in 2024 elections either, as it again associated its political rivals with Pakistan and warned the public against voting for its political opponents - the INDIA alliance, particularly the Indian National Congress. This anti-Pakistan narrative may have helped the BJP to further consolidate its 'nationalist' credentials, but it has, on the other hand, done further damage to the possibility of improved bilateral relations. Given the importance of public perceptions in foreign-policy making, by constantly demonising Pakistan, the BJP has further widened the gulf between the people of the two countries. For the past ten years, Prime Minister Modi has maintained an acrimonious and aggressive posture vis-a-vis Pakistan and in the process engendered such negativity in the minds of the Indian public that it would be near impossible for Modi himself to do a course correction and create space for positive engagement. This gulf created by the BJP between the two countries and their peoples will prove to be a formidable challenge for any government in future.

The BJP's adamant refusal to engage with Pakistan in a meaningful and sustained dialogue on the core dispute of Jammu and Kashmir that has bedevilled the relationship all along, is another point for pessimism. As has been mentioned above, the BJP only wishes to engage with Pakistan on its own terms, while seeking to side-track issues that are matter of serious concern and interest to Pakistan. This is also evident from the latest statement by Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar where he said that India would want to seek a solution of the issue of so-called 'cross-border terrorism',¹⁴ conveniently glossing over India's own state-sponsored terrorism against Pakistan and its extra-judicial and extra-territorial assassinations in Pakistan. Mr. Modi himself, in his interview with Republic TV anchor-person Arnab Goswami, took visible pride claiming that he has put a 'lock' on the 'Pakistan box.' With such entrenched negative mindset and persistence in a belligerent posture towards Pakistan on India's part, the prospects of improved bilateral relations

¹⁴ Kamran Yousaf, 'Jaishankar Sets Rules of Engagement with Pakistan', *The Express Tribune*, 11 June 2024, sec. News, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2471131/jaishankar-sets-rules-of-engagement-with-pakistan>.

would appear to be grim at the moment. Until the BJP-ruled India has a fundamental re-think of its Pakistan policy, the prospects of any forward movement in the relationship would remain limited, if any.