

# How Prime Minister Modi Can Sustain India's Pakistan Dialogue

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## SUMMARY

India's renewed political engagement with Pakistan in late 2015 has been followed by an agreement to resume a structured dialogue between the two countries after three tense years. Yet, a terrorist attack in January 2016 on an Indian air base in the border state of Punjab underlined the enduring fragility of the relationship. Skeptics believe the pattern of dialogue-disruption-dialogue might simply persist. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, can break out of that vicious circle by changing the way India frames and conducts dialogue with Pakistan. A number of steps could lend stability to India's engagement with Pakistan and make it more sustainable and oriented toward outcomes.

### Recommendations for the Modi Government

#### *Break the Mold*

- Continue to put politics, not bureaucratic conservatism, in command to drive the peace process with Pakistan.
- Resist pressure from the media to suspend the peace process at the first setback.
- Explore opening up a channel of communication with the Pakistan Army.

#### *Broaden the Base*

- Draw the opposition parties, especially the Indian National Congress, into the peace process by encouraging their leaders to travel across the troubled frontier between the two countries.
- Invite the chief ministers of the states bordering Pakistan—Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat—to initiate contact with the neighboring regions across the frontier.
- Liberalize the visa regime to promote exchanges between religious communities, business groups, and civil societies.

#### *Address Hard Issues*

- Build on the Bangkok Mechanism—the newly established dialogue on terrorism between the two countries' national security advisers—to strengthen engagement with Pakistani security agencies.
- Revive the negotiations on Kashmir conducted by the special envoys of then Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh and then Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf between 2005 and 2007.
- Revisit the many negotiations that came close to fruition during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's decadelong engagement with Pakistan, ranging from trade liberalization to energy exchanges to the Siachen dispute in Kashmir.

After much trial and error, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is preparing for a formal and structured engagement with Pakistan in early 2016. Modi had previously pulled back, barely three months after his outreach to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 2014 following his election. But he embarked on a sustained effort to engage Sharif in the second half of 2015. Following meetings between the national security advisers and foreign ministers in early December 2015, the two sides announced the resumption of dialogue. Now named the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, it covers ten themes, including Kashmir, terrorism, trade, and humanitarian issues. Modi topped that rapid diplomatic maneuver with the surprising decision to land in Lahore, on very short notice, on Christmas Day, receiving a warm welcome from Sharif. Although the visit did not involve formal talks, it demonstrated Modi's commitment to the peace process and his willingness to take big political risks in the pursuit of a normal relationship with Pakistan.

Never a comfortable relationship, India's ties with Pakistan entered a very volatile phase in the late 1980s—marked by the introduction of nuclear weapons, frequent military crises, cross-border terrorism, and the intensification of the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir. Repeated efforts by New Delhi to develop a neighborly relationship with Pakistan through sustained engagement have been unsuccessful. Tantalizing moments of hope for major agreements have been rudely shattered by major terrorist incidents. Suspending talks after every such episode, New Delhi has eventually returned to the negotiating table each time, recognizing that avoiding talking to Islamabad did not in any way ease India's problems with cross-border terrorism. The

tension between the imperative of normalizing relations with Pakistan and the difficulty of finding a way forward has been the dominant motif of India's dialogue with the country for nearly three decades.

The terrorist attack on India's Pathankot air base on January 2, 2016, by a militant suicide squad that had come across the Pakistan border seemed to suggest nothing had changed. For many, it was a predictable turn of events. Spoilers in Pakistan have repeatedly sabotaged efforts by the political leadership to find a way out of the extended stasis in bilateral relations.

What was not predictable, however, were the reactions in New Delhi and Islamabad to the Pathankot attack. Modi did not respond with what would have previously been personal anger and pique at the Pathankot events, barely a week after his bold Christmas overture to Pakistan. Instead of suspending the peace process in a huff, Modi ordered restraint on the part of his senior political colleagues and officials and was willing to wait to see how Pakistan would respond. Islamabad, for its part, went beyond a routine condemnation of the terrorist attack, offering to follow up on the leads provided by New Delhi and investigate the incident. Sharif picked up the phone and talked to Modi, and Pakistan's national security adviser, Lieutenant General Nasir Khan Janjua, spoke with his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval.

As India waits for substantive Pakistani action against the plotters of the Pathankot attack, it has agreed to continue the conversation between the two foreign secretaries about organizing the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue in the spring and summer of 2016. The dialogue in turn is expected to generate

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sufficient momentum to make a success of Modi's visit to Pakistan later in the year when he attends a summit of the subcontinent's regional forum—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Although the recent track record of India's negotiations with Pakistan does not generate much hope, Modi may have a rare opportunity in 2016 to reorganize the nature of India's engagement with Pakistan. A strong standing in his own party, a majority in the lower house of parliament, a significant improvement in India's relations with all major powers, the growing international concern about terrorism, and Pakistan's own internal debate about violent extremism provide Modi with important openings to take fresh initiatives toward Islamabad. While there is no guarantee of success, Modi's domestic and international political capital gives him a favorable balance between risk and reward when dealing with Pakistan.

## BREAKING THE MOLD

Modi's roller-coaster ride with Pakistan during 2014 and 2015 has invited much criticism for its frequent flip-flops. But his decision to fly on short notice to Lahore and his determination to continue the dialogue mark the emergence of a new, self-assured approach to Pakistan that has survived the immediate tension after the Pathankot attack. There are at least three new elements in Modi's policy toward Pakistan that should be continued.

**Put politics in command.** The permanent bureaucracy has significant power to shape policy in New Delhi. This is particularly true in the national security sector where the Ministry of External Affairs, the intelligence

agencies, the armed forces, and the Ministry of Defense are strongly rooted in conservatism. They are utterly risk averse when dealing with the main actors molding India's external environment—Pakistan, China, and the United States. In all three cases, political leaders have sought to spearhead policymaking to spur change. The elected leadership, however, has typically been constrained by one important factor—political authority became weaker as coalition governments replaced single-party rule in India between 1989 and 2014. This helped increase the power of the bureaucracy vis-à-vis the political leadership.

Modi is the first leader since Rajiv Gandhi, who was prime minister of India from 1984 to 1989, to enjoy a full majority in the lower house of parliament. He has made no secret of his desire to take charge of policy. While many constraints remain on his ability to dominate economic policy making, Modi has successfully established his leadership on foreign policy. This has been quite visible, for example, in the manner in which he has dealt with the United States. A similar effort will be more demanding in the case of Pakistan, but Modi appears prepared to take his chances.

From the very beginning of his tenure as prime minister, Modi has sought to strip bureaucratic rigidity and excessive protocol from India's engagement with Pakistan. While it has cost him some political capital, he seems determined to control the nature and direction of India's Pakistan policy. Unlike his predecessor Manmohan Singh, Modi has in general been willing to take personal responsibility for difficult decisions, to focus on problem solving, and to

continuously monitor the implementation of commitments already made. This approach is likely to bring greater coherence and decisiveness to India's engagement with Pakistan, and it should be encouraged.

**Break free from the mass media pressure that has repeatedly derailed India's engagement with Pakistan.** If the bureaucracy has choked the peace process with formalism, the media has turned every encounter between the two governments into a contest of gladiators. Modi's answer to this problem has been to ignore the media's noise and turn interacting with Pakistan into a routine process.

That high-level political contact between the two governments has traditionally been episodic is reflected in the fact that Modi's visit to Lahore was only the eighth by an Indian prime minister since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Manmohan Singh, despite putting much energy into resolving long-standing problems with Pakistan, did not visit the country even once in his decade-long tenure as prime minister.

Modi in contrast wants to ensure that there are informal visits on every possible occasion with India's neighbors in general and Pakistan in particular. Modi has not yet made talks with Pakistan a humdrum affair, but any movement in that direction will regenerate some flexibility for New Delhi's decision-making on Pakistan. Weak coalition governments since 1989 have all been vulnerable to pressure from the mass media, especially from television networks, whose weight and reach have dramatically increased during the same period. As policymaking came under intense but not necessarily informed media scrutiny,

diplomacy toward Pakistan became rather difficult given the substantial emotional baggage involved in the relationship. By turning the engagement with Pakistan into a quotidian affair, Modi can regain much needed space for diplomats.

**Explore engagement with the Pakistan Army.** The nature of civil-military relations in Pakistan has meant India has found it difficult to communicate with the army leadership when civilian governments have been in power. India's contact with the army was possible only when Pakistan was under military rule and the army chief was the head of state. While India made a significant amount of progress in the negotiations with then president General Pervez Musharraf between 2003 and 2007, it had difficulties moving forward with the civilian government that was elected in 2008. Although the leadership of the Pakistan Peoples Party was very well disposed toward India and was ready to advance a broad array of issues, the army would not give it the necessary freedom of action.

The appointment of a recently retired general, Nasir Khan Janjua, as the national security adviser in October 2015 may have presented New Delhi with a Pakistani interlocutor who has the confidence of the prime minister as well as of the army chief: General Raheel Sharif. The continuous conversation between the two national security advisers—which has come to be known as Bangkok Mechanism—appears to have had some positive effect on the negotiations.

While few in New Delhi are ready to bet that the Pakistan Army has ended its hostility toward India, Modi and his advisers are willing to find out if Janjua might be a productive

channel to the military leadership. New Delhi hopes that having a credible interlocutor with the army's leadership, which dominates Pakistan's national security decisionmaking, will help overcome an structural weakness in India's engagement with Pakistan.

## **BROADENING THE BASE**

Modi's leadership and personal commitment lends much credibility to the current round of the peace process. But the fragility of the engagement with Pakistan means the prime minister needs to garner as much domestic political support as he can.

Modi is having some difficulty with the opposition Indian National Congress party on his Pakistan initiatives. In resisting all of Modi's moves toward Pakistan, the Congress is merely paying back the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) knee-jerk opposition to the Congress-led UPA government's diplomatic efforts toward Pakistan between 2004 and 2014. The decade of UPA rule saw the BJP refusing to support any major foreign policy initiative of Manmohan Singh, including those that the BJP had begun during its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) rule from 1998 to 2004. This approach had broken the careful effort at consensus building during the prime ministerial tenures of P. V. Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Restoring that consensus is vital for Indian diplomacy, especially toward Pakistan.

While Modi needs to find a way to work with the Congress, he can also easily tap into the latent, but widespread, political support for engaging Pakistan.

**Encourage the major opposition political parties to travel to Pakistan and connect with their counterparts.** The Samajwadi Party, which runs India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, has welcomed Modi's Pakistan moves. The two leaders of the state of Bihar, Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav, who together drubbed the BJP in the 2015 state assembly elections, have traveled to Pakistan in the past with the message of peace. The Communist parties, which are ideologically hostile to Modi and the BJP, have backed the prime minister's peace process with Pakistan. Encouraging these actors to continue pursuing further engagement should be a major priority for Modi.

## **Invite the chief ministers of India's western provinces that are next door to Pakistan to initiate contact with Islamabad.**

The greatest untapped source of political support for Modi's Pakistan outreach is in the states bordering Pakistan—Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. Three other states, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Delhi, also have historical and geographic connections to Pakistan.

The prime minister could encourage the chief ministers of all these states to embark on visits across the border and engage with their counterparts in the states in Pakistan. This would fit with Modi's own promise during the 2014 election campaign that he would give states a greater voice in the conduct of foreign policy. Promoting subregional contact and cooperation could ease the pressure on the narrowly constructed peace process, whose narrative is shaped in New Delhi.

There are precedents for this. There have been brief moments in the past when state chief

ministers embarked on exchanges with their counterparts, for example in Punjab. Cross-border contact between the chief ministers of eastern and western Punjab in recent years helped outline the immense possibilities for subregional cooperation on the subcontinent.

**Liberalize the visa regime to promote exchanges.** Business and civil society groups have always championed the peace process. But a much more powerful peace constituency could be the devout millions in both countries who would like improved access to places of worship across the border. Modi's personal religiosity and his deep interest in promoting tourism have already seen religious tourism put on the bilateral agenda. More sensitive, but equally important, will be the promotion of exchanges between religious scholars and leaders that could help reduce the space for religious hatemongering that has gained so much ground in both countries in recent years. Modi has often averred that strengthening the shared Sufi culture on the subcontinent might be the best antidote to the rise of extremism and terrorism in South Asia.

The main obstacle to promoting exchanges has been the deeply restrictive visa regime between the two countries. Moments of tension lead to further limitations on granting visas. Given India's interest in promoting person-to-person contact, New Delhi must liberalize the visa regime—unilaterally, if necessary.

### **ADDRESSING HARD ISSUES**

Many would argue that even with the widest possible political base, the peace process will last only as long as there is no major terrorist incident in India. If cross-border terrorism remains the core issue for India in this way

and the most difficult one in the peace process, New Delhi also has to cope with the fact that Kashmir is the main issue for Pakistan. Further, Pakistan's formal position insists that the people of Kashmir are a party to the dispute between New Delhi and Islamabad. Pakistan's constant public expression of this through meetings with the leaderships of separatist groups in Kashmir has been unacceptable to the NDA government and the source of the breakdown of Modi's peace initiatives in August 2014 and again in August 2015. New Delhi hopes that sustained and productive engagement with Pakistan will reduce the significant salience that this issue has acquired in recent years.

What is clear though is the fact that Modi has returned to the January 2004 framework, in which then Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and then Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf agreed on the interrelationship among different issues in the peace process. Instead of arguing over sequencing—which core issue should be focused on first—they decided to address terrorism and Kashmir simultaneously. Musharraf promised to prevent the use of the territory under Pakistan's control for activities directed against India. Vajpayee, in turn, agreed to purposefully negotiate a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. The two leaders also resolved to pursue, in the interim, wide-ranging confidence-building measures. Manmohan Singh built on this tripod constructed by Vajpayee.

As a result, the years between 2004 and 2007 saw considerable forward movement on a range of issues, including Kashmir. Although there were a couple of major terrorist incidents during this period, New Delhi did not allow them to disrupt the peace process.

But the attack in Mumbai on November 26, 2008, put enormous pressure on the 2004 understanding. Manmohan Singh's effort to rejuvenate the peace process afterward was clouded by the terrorism question, especially the lack of progress in Pakistan on the trial of individuals accused of perpetrating the November attack.

Modi has addressed the question of cross-border violence by establishing a new mechanism for talks on terrorism between the two national security advisers. At the end of Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to Pakistan on December 9, 2015, both sides "noted the successful talks on terrorism and security related issues in Bangkok by the two [advisers]." They also agreed that the advisers "will continue to address all issues connected to terrorism. The Indian side was assured of the steps being taken to expedite the early conclusion of the Mumbai trial." Similar mechanisms in the past did not deliver adequate results; Pakistan's promises regarding the trial for the November 2008 attackers have not been met.

The core issues of Kashmir and terrorism have been viewed as interlinked and intractable. Might they emerge as deal breakers again? To be sure, the Pathankot attack will not be the last. There will be more terrorist incidents in the near future. But the Bangkok Mechanism was tested quickly in 2016, and its immediate activation has generated some hope in New Delhi that it could be different this time.

Whether the peace process will survive a big attack will depend on the level of confidence generated through counterterrorism cooperation between Pakistan and India.

An extended period of reduced cross-border violence will, however, create room for Indian political advances on Kashmir. Mutually reassuring steps on terrorism and Kashmir could create a virtuous circle that could be boosted through expanding cooperation in other areas.

#### **Build on the Bangkok Mechanism to strengthen the engagement with the security agencies in Pakistan.**

The true test will lie in the nature and extent of cooperation from Pakistan in finding and punishing the perpetrators of the Pathankot attack. Beyond the investigations of the specific incidents, India would like to see Pakistan begin dismantling the anti-India terrorist networks based on its soil. Despite India's evident shared interests with Pakistan on countering terrorism, New Delhi has not been able to conduct a productive dialogue with Islamabad on the matter. Part of the problem has been New Delhi's difficulty in directly engaging Pakistan's security agencies on issues relating to terrorism. The Bangkok Mechanism holds the promise of changing that.

#### **Revive the 2005-2007 negotiations on Kashmir.**

Pakistan, for its part, would certainly want India to take positive steps regarding Kashmir. India has good reasons of its own to consider taking unilateral actions to reduce tensions on the ground. New Delhi should be prepared to pick up the threads of the Kashmir conversation between the special envoys that came to a halt in 2007. The two sides have already decided to restore the ceasefire agreed to in those negotiations through contacts between the security forces on the frontier. A reduction in cross-border infiltration and a crackdown on terrorist groups directed at Kashmir should allow

New Delhi to reduce its military presence in the state and create a more conducive environment for political consultations—on and across the Line of Control—about the longer-term solutions to the question of Jammu and Kashmir.

**Revisit stalled agreements forged during the United Progressive Alliance government's decadelong negotiations with**

**Pakistan.** If Modi can show some early gains from the peace process, his ability to manage potential shocks will significantly improve. Here again, Modi might well benefit from following the road traveled by his predecessor, Manmohan Singh, whose tenure saw India and Pakistan come close to signing a number of agreements. These covered resolving the Siachen and Sir Creek disputes, normalizing trade relations, trading electricity across the border, and constructing an oil pipeline across the Punjab. Modi may have an opportunity to move forward on at least some of these in the immediate term. He should make the most of those openings.

## **RISKS AND REWARDS**

The Pathankot attack has reinforced the view among skeptics in New Delhi that the chances of breaking the vicious circle in Indian-Pakistani relations are grim. The long list of accumulated grievances on both sides and the deepening distrust in recent years make India's peace process with Pakistan an especially brittle enterprise.

That has not, however, stopped Modi or his predecessors from pursuing peace with Pakistan. The failures of one Indian leader have not prevented the next one from trying again. Without overcoming the bitter legacy of partition, these last few prime ministers recognized that India's internal, regional, and international prospects will remain under a cloud. Vajpayee had the political will to seek a normalization of India's relations with Pakistan. He did not have the time. Manmohan Singh had the time and inclination but not the internal freedom of action. Fate may have dealt Modi better cards than Vajpayee and Singh. He should not be afraid of playing them. ◀

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