

## **Elections and Foreign Policy: India's Pakistan Debate**

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### **Summary**

*India's debate on Pakistan during the 2024 general elections reveals little about the record of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress Party governments on engaging Pakistan. Although the BJP finds Pakistan a valuable punching bag during the elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is hopefully ready to pick up the threads of engagement with Islamabad if he wins a third term.*

Foreign policy has not figured in any significant way in India's ongoing general elections; but Pakistan has been an exception. The question of engaging Pakistan, its nuclear weapons and the violent protests against Islamabad in the part of Kashmir under its control have all figured this debate; but the quality of the discourse has been disappointing.

The Congress Party's manifesto for the election offers cautious critique of the Narendra Modi government's foreign policy, but there is little divergence with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government on the question of Pakistan. "Engagement with Pakistan depends fundamentally on its willingness and ability to end cross-border terrorism", the [manifesto](#) mentioned.

However, the Congress Party's controversial veteran, Mani Shankar Aiyar's reported remarks on ["respecting" Pakistan](#) and talking to Islamabad because it has an atomic arsenal produced a major controversy. They have created an opening for Prime Minister Modi's vigorous counterattack on the Congress Party's presumed approach to Pakistan. [Modi declared](#) that the Congress Party was scaring India into an accommodative position with Pakistan. Through the campaign, the BJP has seized all opportunities to paint the Congress Party as 'soft' on Pakistan.

Aiyar's liberal views on engaging Pakistan have never been a matter of conviction, but not in line with the Congress Party's policies or the nation's foreign policy establishment that the Congress Party had directed for most of the decades since independence. Aiyar's remarks on assessing the nuclear question and criticising the government for not engaging with Pakistan, however, do not accurately evaluate Modi's record.

Aiyar's view that nuclear weapons must temper India's current hard line on Pakistan was also echoed by Farooq Abdullah, the former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir. Abdullah [was cautioning against](#) the BJP leaders' claims that they will retake the areas of Kashmir under Pakistan's control. He pointed out that Pakistan is a nuclear weapon power.

After it acquired nuclear weapons in the late 1980s, the Pakistan army pursued a low-intensity conflict under the shadow of a nuclear escalation and mounted pressure on India to

negotiate the Kashmir dispute on its terms. All the governments in New Delhi, irrespective of their political hue, have struggled to find answers. The question here is not about 'respecting' Pakistan; there was no way New Delhi could ignore Pakistan's nuclear weapons over the last four decades. The challenge for New Delhi is 'deterring' Rawalpindi's threat of escalation to the nuclear level and trumping India's option for effective conventional military responses.

Aiyar's claim that the BJP government has not engaged Pakistan does not stand scrutiny. On his first day in office in May 2014, [Modi spent time](#) with the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, who had come to New Delhi along with other South Asian leaders to attend the swearing-in of the BJP government.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh could not visit Pakistan even once during his 10 years at the helm (2004-14) because of the resistance in the Congress Party leadership. Modi, in contrast, travelled on short notice to Lahore on Christmas day of 2015 to call on Sharif at his family home. The hopes for a reset in relations generated by Modi's visit were dashed amidst a cross-border terror attack on an Indian military facility in Pathankot. Modi broke from the custom and invited Pakistan's powerful Inter-Service Intelligence to conduct a joint investigation with the Indian agencies. However, his initiative did not produce any results.

The Modi years have also seen the establishment of the [Kartarpur Sahib](#) corridor to Pakistan for Sikh pilgrims in 2019 and the negotiation of a [ceasefire accord in 2021](#). Above all, the Modi government made a serious effort to deter Pakistan by ordering vigorous cross-border military response to terror attacks. Although the effectiveness of this response can be debated, Pakistan could no longer assume that New Delhi will not escalate in response to terror attacks.

The Modi government also changed the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 2019 and blocked Pakistan's efforts, with the help of China, to take the issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This involved winning Western support in countering the Sino-Pak moves in the UNSC.

Meanwhile, the [continuing protests](#) against Pakistan's misrule in the Kashmir region under its control stand in contrast to the peaceful polling on the Indian side. It added grist to the BJP mill on retaking the region across the Line of Control in J&K.

Put simply, Modi has managed to [change the terms of engagement](#) with Pakistan. It is unfortunate that Modi chose to combine his vigorous response to heaping contempt on Pakistan by pointing to its current economic crisis. Through the campaign, the prime minister and his cabinet colleagues have flaunted their new willingness to [get inside](#) Pakistan and target the terrorists.

The BJP's needless verbal aggression against Pakistan comes at a time when the new Pakistan government, led by the Sharif brothers – Nawaz and Shehbaz – are sending interesting signals on improving ties with India. Although the references to Kashmir continue in Pakistan's official statements, the new government has highlighted the case for [resuming trade ties](#) with India that were cut after New Delhi's constitutional amendment on Kashmir.

Modi and the BJP might hope that their interlocutors in Pakistan will understand that the high-pitched rhetoric is just part of electioneering and does not reflect policy intentions. Modi and Nawaz had got along well in the past and together they have a chance to resurrect the peace process between the two nations.

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