

# ISAS Insights

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## **An Aspirational ‘new wave’ of India-Pakistan Dialogue**

*The terrorist strike at an Indian military installation early in the New Year has not immediately set the clock back on the positive outcome of the earlier Christmas-Day informal meeting between the leaders of India and Pakistan in Lahore. However, the success of the new “comprehensive bilateral dialogue”, if launched by mid-January 2016 as anticipated, is not assured yet, despite the Pakistani military itself having a ‘proxy negotiator’ now. Nor can external stakes in a stable Pakistan-India equation guarantee a settlement between them. For now, there are some signs of a cautious, new resolve for peace on both sides of the conventional divide.*

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By the turn of 2016, a pleasant cameo of camaraderie, which featured the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan in a vivid display of friendliness on Christmas Day 2015, has been eclipsed by a familiar but distressing reality. Quite often, a high-point in the India-Pakistan engagement has been followed by a negative development. Such a sequence was dramatically evident when a high-profile summit between the Prime Ministers of Pakistan and India in Lahore was

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followed by an armed conflict between the two sides at the snowy heights of Kargil in 1999. But the latest cameo of a feel-good meeting in Lahore has not been fully erased, at this writing.

On a serene day in the Christian calendar, the ‘Hindu-nationalist’ Prime Minister of secular India, Narendra Modi, held talks, *sans* prior publicity, with his counterpart from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, in Lahore, as 2015 was drawing to a close. The wider international community, weary of tensions across the globe, heaved a sigh of relief over the digitalised images of such a “surprise” diplomatic development. But some subterranean forces would have none of this. Or, so it appears. A few terrorists, suspected to have operated from out of Pakistan, have struck at an Indian Air Force base in Pathankot, near the border between the two uneasy neighbours, on 2 January 2016. Several lives, including those of the attackers, were lost; the terror strike was, by and large, ‘foiled’, in the sense that there was no greater carnage.

A stoic sense of resistance descended on the political camp in India which was beginning to count the blessings of having a hawkish prime minister who might be able to stabilise relations with Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> For his part, Mr Modi did not blame Pakistan when, in his initial comment, he said “enemies of humanity [,] who cannot see the nation succeed, had attempted to cause harm to the Indian Armed Forces.”<sup>3</sup> In a parallel sign of dismay, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry lost no time to “condemn the terrorist incident”. Heartfelt condolences were also expressed. More significantly, Pakistan conveyed a political punch-line of real-time relevance: “Building on the goodwill created during the recent high level contacts between the two countries, *Pakistan remains committed to partner with India* as well as other countries in the [South Asian] region to completely eradicate the menace of terrorism afflicting our region”.<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis added).

This was a statesman-like stand by both India and Pakistan in the immediate wake of the terror attack at Pathankot. However, diplomatic circles were soon agog with speculation that New Delhi might still feel constrained to call off the foreign-secretary-level talks, which Mr Sharif

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<sup>2</sup> The roller-coaster mood of hopes, generated by the Christmas-Day confabulations between Mr Narendra Modi and Mr Nawaz Sharif, and despair, caused by the terrorist strike on 2 January 2016, is evident from the varied media reportage on these two events.

<sup>3</sup> A message on the website of the Prime Minister of India, <http://pmindia.gov.in/en/news-updates/>

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, Pakistan condemns the terrorist incident in Pathankot, India, 2nd January 2016, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=MzM3MA>

and Mr Modi were believed to have agreed upon during their latest meeting in Lahore. In an apparent effort to bring back a sense of new normality, in this context, the Pakistan Foreign Ministry said: “In line with Pakistan's commitment to effectively counter and eradicate terrorism, the Government is in touch with the Indian government and is working on the leads provided by it. Living in the same region and with a common history, the two countries should remain committed to a sustained dialogue process. The challenge of terrorism calls for strengthening our resolve to a cooperative approach”.<sup>5</sup>

Such a ministerial-level assurance from Pakistan did not appear to have addressed India's concerns, prompting Mr Sharif to telephone Mr Modi on 5 January 2016. After that, the Indian side disclosed as follows: “Prime Minister Modi strongly emphasised the need for Pakistan to take firm and immediate action against the organisations and individuals responsible for and linked to the Pathankot terrorist attack. Specific and actionable information in this regard has been provided to Pakistan. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assured Prime Minister Modi that his government would take prompt and decisive action against the terrorists”.<sup>6</sup>

A day later (on 6 January 2016), Pakistan disclosed that Mr Sharif had, in his telephonic conversation with Mr Modi, “appreciated the maturity shown by the Indian Government in its statements” after the terrorist strike at Pathankot. Mr Sharif was quoted as saying that “his government was working on the leads and information provided by the Indian government”. Assuring Mr Modi that Pakistan would “investigate this matter”, Mr Sharif noted that “whenever a serious effort for bringing peace between the two countries was underway, terrorists try to derail the process”. The authoritative Pakistani version of this important telephonic talk concluded on these lines: “Both the Prime Ministers agreed that a cordial and cooperative relationship between the two countries would be the most appropriate response to the nefarious designs of the terrorists”.<sup>7</sup>

Amid the latest surge in the Indo-Pakistani tensions, so soon after the Modi-Sharif talks on Christmas Day last year, the Afghan National Security Forces thwarted a terrorist attack on the

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=MzM3NQ>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26256/Telephone\\_Call\\_from\\_Prime\\_Mini...](http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26256/Telephone_Call_from_Prime_Mini...)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.pmo.gov.pk/news\\_details.php?news\\_id=464](http://www.pmo.gov.pk/news_details.php?news_id=464)

Indian Consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif. The Afghanistan factor in the India-Pakistan matrix is a study in itself, with the Pakistani military-intelligence agencies widely believed to scout in Afghanistan for gaining ‘strategic depth’ there against India.

Regardless of the Afghan factor, the recent high-level India-Pakistan contacts in focus here are: (1) the latest “unscheduled” Indo-Pakistani prime ministerial meeting in Lahore; (2) India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj’s visit to Islamabad where she attended a multilateral meeting on Afghanistan, and met Mr Sharif on 9 December 2015 – when the two sides announced their agreement to re-start the stalled talks, now in the name and style of “Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue”; (3) the talks between the national security advisors of the two countries in Bangkok earlier in the same month; and (4) the Modi-Sharif encounter of the diplomatic kind on the margins of the United Nations Climate Conference in Paris in late-November 2015. In order to sustain such a surge of diplomatic momentum, the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan are slated to meet in Islamabad by mid-January 2016. They are expected to chart a road-map for the newly-agreed “comprehensive dialogue” on all issues that trouble the two sides.

It is obviously prudent to wait for the start of this yet-again-new Indo-Pakistani dialogue to draw even tentative projections about the future trajectory of this deeply chequered and crisis-prone relationship. A nodding acquaintance with this relationship will suffice to recognise how circular it is: the same starting points are reached time and again. It is logical, therefore, that the future talks, if they have to be meaningful at all, must be aimed at straightening this circle so as to facilitate a linear forward movement. Obviously, such a task is easier to visualise in a geometrical metaphor than to accomplish in the Indo-Pakistani geopolitical setting. At this writing, though, the terrorist strike on 2 January 2016 has not set the clock back on the current slow momentum towards an aspirational new wave of dialogue.<sup>8</sup> In this context, it will be instructive to study the so-called “surprise” meeting between Mr Modi and Mr Sharif in Lahore on a day that was best left to Santa Claus to spring pleasant surprises.

The outcome of the Modi-Sharif meeting in Lahore, for all its substantive symbolism, was hardly commented upon by either India or Pakistan through concrete official details about what exactly was discussed. So, an intelligent assessment of the factors at play during and after that

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<sup>8</sup> This is true as of 6 January 2016 (mid-day).

Lahore meeting is the only sure guide to the more-immediate future of this new “comprehensive bilateral dialogue”, which is yet to take off. This new nomenclature reflects the possibility of discussions on the entire spectrum of issues, inclusive of India’s sense of being a constant target of terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and Pakistan’s quest for a final settlement of the political status of Kashmir, besides several other issues. In a nuanced difference, the earlier ill-fated “composite dialogue”, while covering much the same issues, gave rise to the impression that a package-settlement of all issues might be preferred at the same time. Nevertheless, this was not really specified as the goal. There was a masterly ambiguity, perhaps as a strategic intent in a complex situation. It now remains to be seen whether the anticipated road-map for the present aspirational “comprehensive bilateral dialogue” will allow for subject-specific fast-track and normal-track of discussions.

## **Ebb and Flow of Political Resolve**

As for the spade-work that has set the stage for the possibility of this “comprehensive bilateral dialogue”, the Modi-Sharif meeting in Lahore was certainly not the first time that they talked to each other. Their very first meeting as prime ministers, another huge “surprise” (if you will), happened at the very stroke of Mr Modi assuming office as Prime Minister of India in New Delhi in late-May 2014. It was widely believed that Mr Sharif, himself a thrice-elected Prime Minister of Pakistan, did exert diligence, in consultation with that country’s powerful military establishment, before accepting Mr Modi’s invitation and attending his ceremonial assumption of office.

When the two leaders met in New Delhi after that ceremony, they decided that the foreign secretaries of the two countries should meet in due course. That, in itself, was viewed as a significant move, considering that the “composite dialogue” had withered on the vine, for one reason or other, since the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008. India had duly traced those attacks to Pakistani terrorist master-minds, and the two countries are even now locked in arguments and counter-arguments over the slow pace of evidence-based trials in Pakistan in the relevant cases. In such an ambience, but unrelated to this terrorism issue *per se*, the planned resumption of Indo-Pakistani foreign-secretary-level talks in 2014 – the anticipated first step

in “structured” official-level talks by Mr Modi’s watch – did not take place, because Islamabad was assessed to have crossed a red line that his government had drawn.

The contacts that Pakistan publicly renewed with an anti-India separatist group in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, in the run-up to the commencement of those “structured” official-level talks in 2014, angered the Modi Government which called off that process. Thereafter, a frosty phase of minimal contacts, essentially on the margins of multilateral meetings, ensued in Indo-Pakistani official relations. As Raja Mohan explains, “the resurgence of tensions on the [India-Pakistan] border [sometime after Mr Modi’s first outreach to Mr Sharif] and Islamabad’s engagement with the Kashmiri separatists saw [Mr] Modi suspend the [planned] talks with Pakistan in August 2014. [Thereafter] Recognising the problems [that the] continued disengagement would create for India, [Mr] Modi lifted the suspension of political contacts in February 2015”.<sup>9</sup> It was in this changing milieu that Mr Modi and Mr Sharif met at Ufa (Russia) in July 2015. The two leaders were there to attend a summit of the China-Russia-pioneered Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in a prelude to the admission of India and Pakistan as full-fledged members in due course. (At this writing, the formalities of India’s and Pakistan’s entry into the SCO as full-fledged members are still under way).

At Ufa, Mr Modi and Mr Sharif agreed upon an outline of a possible new course of dialogue between their countries;<sup>10</sup> a meeting of their national security advisors was agreed upon. However, the scheduled meeting of the advisors did not take place, amid an acrimonious dispute between India and Pakistan on the finer limits to the possible conversation between the two security-mandarins. India wanted laser-like focus on just the terrorism issues, while Pakistan desired a broad-spectrum conversation that would cover the Kashmir question as well. After this fiasco, Islamabad appointed a military-anchored official, General (Retired) Naseer Khan Janjua, as the country’s new National Security Advisor. He is believed to be a close associate of Pakistan’s current Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif (not related to Mr Nawaz Sharif). In a sense, this aspect changed the dynamics of the India-Pakistan diplomacy

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<sup>9</sup> C. Raja Mohan, *Modi’s World: Expanding India’s Sphere of Influence*, Harper Collins Publishers India, 2015, p. 67

<sup>10</sup> For a scholarly interpretation of the India-Pakistan understanding at Ufa, read ISAS Working Paper No. 209 (17 September 2015): *After Ufa: Why the India-Pakistan Dialogue needs to be reconceptualised on the lines of ‘Principled Negotiations’* by Subrata Kumar Mitra; for a diplomatic perspective on the South Asia-relevant developments at Ufa, read ISAS Insights No. 290 (2 September 2015): *New Cross-Currents in the India-China-Pakistan Triangle* by P S Suryanarayana.

itself. It was in this overarching ambience that the two Prime Ministers met in Lahore on Christmas Day last year.

On that day, Mr Modi first telephoned Mr Nawaz Sharif from Kabul, greeted him on his 66th birthday, and rushed to Lahore for a follow-up conversation. It is this sequence that lent their conversation an aura of a “surprise” informal ‘summit’. Significantly, Pakistan’s new National Security Advisor (NSA), Gen (Retd) Janjua, did not participate in this informal meeting, as its sudden timing might not have actually suited him.<sup>11</sup> This, too, lent some credence to the hypothesis of a “surprise” ‘summit’. It is nearly impossible, though, to believe that all the sensitive protocol-and-security clearances for the many Indian visitors in Mr Modi’s delegation were secured at lightning speed, without any prior permission from an India-wary country. These doubts do not, however, downplay this informal meeting.

An interesting line of inquiry is whether Mr Nawaz Sharif was also trying to capitalise on such a situation and spring a “surprise” of his own in Pakistan’s domestic politics. Gen Sharif is hugely popular in Pakistan now, because of his over-drive against the terrorists who have been acting with impunity in his country, and on account of his calls for good civilian governance (an indirect indictment of Mr Nawaz Sharif’s rule). In these circumstances, it is possible that the civilian Mr Sharif might have really wanted to make a point that the civilian leaders were still central to Islamabad’s diplomacy towards New Delhi. This could have prompted the Pakistani Prime Minister to go ahead with his meeting with Mr Modi even in the absence of Gen (Retd) Janjua, whereas the Indian leader was accompanied by his NSA Ajit Doval.

However, a key requirement is that Pakistan’s military establishment *must also be seen* to be supportive of the current process of dialogue between Islamabad and New Delhi. A statement of support from the Pakistan Army might have magnified the forward-looking aspect of the latest Nawaz Sharif-Modi meeting. The basic reasoning in this sub-context is that Gen Sharif is seen, in some ways, as a ‘praetorian prime minister’ (virtually a prime minister without that designation, while still being from the military stream). Under such a canopy, Pakistan’s military-anchored NSA will need to engage New Delhi on issues arising from its genuine concerns about the anti-India terrorism emanating from Pakistan. India’s concerns in this

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<sup>11</sup> While Gen (Retd) Janjua’s conspicuous absence during the Modi-Nawaz Sharif meeting in Lahore on 25 December 2015 is a matter of public knowledge, most of my arguments from this passage onwards closely mirror my earlier article on the same subject, for an Indian news journal (*Border Affairs*), in late-December 2015.

regard cannot be discounted at all, even if Pakistan, too, wants to talk of similar concerns regarding India.

## **Fallacy of a Military Talisman**

A fashionable hypothesis is that Gen (Retd) Janjua's recent talks with Mr Doval in Bangkok, in the company of the foreign secretaries of the two countries, is proof that the Pakistan Army is on the same page as the country's civilian leadership on the issue of dialogue with India. Nonetheless, it will be a fallacy to pre-judge, at best, and over-estimate, at worst, that a new wave of Pakistan-India dialogue, if it takes place, has a higher quotient of possible success than in the past because the present Pakistani NSA enjoys close professional proximity to Gen Sharif. Gen (Retd) Janjua is being seen as the domestically-powerful Pakistani military's proxy for talks with India, going forward. But there is no empirically-tenable military talisman for the success of the new aspirational Pakistan-India "comprehensive bilateral dialogue". Recent history is instructive.

It is well-known that the Agra Summit between India's democratic leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Pakistan's powerful military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, collapsed some years ago. For a variety of reasons, surely, the Agra summit got torpedoed at the finishing line, as it were. Later, Gen Musharraf sought to blame India's civilian hawks rather than his own failure to clinch an accord, or a framework-formula, which might have been mutually acceptable. The dismal outcome at Agra showed that Pakistan's highest military leader, who was also the country's unchallenged ruler at that time, did not succeed as a peace-maker. Given such a relevant reality check, it will be premature, at best, and unwise, at worst, to imagine that a settlement is now possible merely because the Pakistani military is believed to be supporting a 'civilian' peace initiative towards India. This is how the current situation appears to me, and this could serve as a valuable insight, going forward.

A relevant poser, therefore, is whether "external pressures" on Pakistan and, perhaps India too, have made, or could make, a positive difference to an Indo-Pakistan dialogue, if begun now. There is considerable speculation in diplomatic circles that Gen Sharif was, during his recent visit to the United States, advised by his top American interlocutors to let his civilian colleagues



talk to India. This is believed to have happened after New Delhi had insisted that Islamabad should not seek to associate Kashmiri separatists with any Indo-Pakistan dialogue. Such speculation sounds credible, because the US has influenced the thinking of the Pakistani state in the past.

A point to recall: at the height of the Pakistan-India Kargil War (or crisis, as some would insist) towards the end of the last century, the US is known to have played a critical behind-the-scene role that soon became widely known. On that occasion, the then US President Bill Clinton had “influenced” a Pakistani civilian leader, the same Mr Nawaz Sharif, to halt the Kargil War which was widely known to have been master-minded by his military chief, the same Gen Musharraf.<sup>12</sup>

## **External Stakes in India-Pakistan Talks**

The primary worries of the international community then (as even now) were (and remain) the ‘potential’ for a ‘nuclear conflict’ between Pakistan and India. A key factor in this ‘scenario’ is the empirical reality that, unlike India, Pakistan does not adopt the doctrine of a “no-first-use of nuclear weapons”. Moreover, prior to the Modi-Nawaz Sharif meeting on 25 December last year, the Indo-Pakistan tensions were heightened by public pronouncements to the effect that Pakistan had now deployed or at least acquired short-range tactical nuclear weapons to deter possible Indian “aggression”.<sup>13</sup> The perceived “bellicosity” of Mr Modi’s India in laying down new red lines for talks with Pakistan was projected as the topical context for Islamabad’s fresh ‘nuclear’ moves at military preparedness.

In such a climate, it is easy to view Gen Sharif’s recent visit to the US as a turning point that has impelled Pakistan to try and engage India in dialogue once again, presumably without matching New Delhi with tit-for-tat conditions at every turn. A perspective of this magnitude is more than plausible indeed, because neither the US side nor Gen Sharif is going to

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<sup>12</sup> While Mr Bill Clinton’s intervention during the Pakistan-India Kargil War in 1999 was widely-chronicled by the international media then itself, scholars have heavily drawn on this episode in various ways. See, for instance, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War*, by C. Christine Fair, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, p. 153

<sup>13</sup> Read ISAS Insights No. 295 (11 November 2015); *Pakistan’s Nuclear Deterrence: From ‘Credible Minimum’ to ‘Full Spectrum’* by Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury.

acknowledge this publicly. However, Pakistan's military and civilian establishments cannot ignore the US because of their calculations of gaining "strategic depth" against India through good relations with Afghanistan – a country of enduring relevance to Washington in its continuing "global war on terror" in some form or other.

At the other end of the Pakistan-India equation, Mr Modi is often portrayed as a statesman who makes independent decisions.<sup>14</sup> Implicit in such a depiction of Mr Modi is the point that his recent moves of leaning towards the US has had a purpose other than compromising India's independent foreign policy by his watch. Also, an implied corollary is that the recent Indo-US statements of 'strategic vision' are designed to shore up India's position *vis a vis* China, with Pakistan *per se* not being the primary factor in the Indo-US calculus now.

At a different level, the unstated Chinese stake in Pakistan's dialogue with India is of critical relevance, going forward. China and Pakistan are well-known "all-weather partners" of practical relevance to India. I think that an emerging reality must be recognised: Beijing's genuine stake in Pakistan's stability so that China could gain strategic access to the Arabian Sea (and onwards to the Indian Ocean) through the Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir ('Azad Jammu and Kashmir') and the 'Northern Areas' as well as the Karakorum Highway. China's stake in Pakistan's stability in this new context can be inferred from the tenacity of purpose that the Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, have displayed in promoting the US\$ 46-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Implicit in this drive is China's enlightened self-interest of not wanting Pakistan-India instability, conflict, and war in the unfolding times. So, China may well have influenced Pakistan to talk to India now. Unsurprisingly, China welcomed the Modi-Nawaz Sharif informal meeting in Lahore as a sign of an increase in their mutual trust.<sup>15</sup>

In the final analysis, though, India will have to reckon with Pakistan's "ideological frontier", a phrase made popular by some scholars. To my way of thinking, Pakistan's psycho-political frontier has three dimensions; (1) the notion that the Pakistani state is intrinsically different

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<sup>14</sup> India's External Affairs Minister, Ms Sushma Swaraj, hailed Mr Modi as a statesman as soon as his "surprise" visit to Lahore on 25 December 2015 became known.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, Spokesperson's Comment, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1328157.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1328157.shtml)

from India's; (2) the growing signs that the Pakistan Army seeks to justify its towering presence in Pakistan by demonstrating a sustained ability to challenge or confound India continuously; and (3) the calculation that the "success" of the Pakistani state is somehow achievable through the "failure" of the Indian model. In coming to terms with Pakistan's psycho-political frontier of such dimensions, India should not lose sight of Islamabad's conventional geopolitical advantages, too, in the international arena. For the Pakistani military and civilian elites, a shared challenge now is to figure out whether Mr Modi's India is, or will be, qualitatively different from the India that they have known all these years.

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