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Charting a New Course: Modi's Pakistan Policy

Five elements define Prime Minister Narendra Modi's effort to end the prolonged strategic stalemate in India's relations with Pakistan. These are bold moves in favour of either peace or war, linking the dialogue to ending cross-border terrorism, discarding the unilateral emphasis on the sanctity of the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir, escalating the conflict horizontally to draw in Balochistan and Afghanistan, and probing the limits of vertical escalation through cross-LoC military action.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to order army raids across the Line of Control in Kashmir at the end of September as a response to the attacks on an Indian military facility ten days earlier has got mixed response. Many have greeted it as a long overdue step to challenge Pakistan's support to cross-border terrorism in India. Some have seen the cross-LoC attacks on terror launch pads as a dangerous move that could intensify the current conflict with Pakistan. Some have criticised it as yet another of the flip-flops that have characterised Modi's Pakistan policy.

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Sudden and frequent reversals have been very much part of India's engagement with Pakistan over the last three decades. Leaders of different political colours have struggled to negotiate peace with Pakistan after nuclear weapons and cross-border terrorism cast a shadow over bilateral relations since the late 1980s. Modi's predecessors—from Rajiv Gandhi to Manmohan Singh—oscillated between engagement in hope, disengagement in despair and confrontation in anger. All leaders believed that their personal sincerity could help end the stalemate with Pakistan. All of them had to eventually settle down to a pattern of dialogue frequently interrupted by terror and military confrontation. Breakthroughs occasionally seemed close at hand; but always remained elusive.

Modi's tenure has followed a similar pattern. He began with great flourish by inviting Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for the inauguration of his government in May 2014. He suspended talks in August 2014 citing the unacceptability of Pakistan's engagement with Kashmiri separatists. He raised the ante with massive and sustained artillery barrage for a few months. Through 2015, Modi explored prospects for resumption of the dialogue with Pakistan. He reaffirmed the determination to normalize relations by dropping by in Lahore at short notice, at the end of 2015. The attacks on the Pathankot Air Force base a week later and Uri in September led him to move in the other direction. A review of Modi's multiple moves suggests the familiar picture of no war, no peace. It also reveals a bolder approach that has sought to break from the past. Five major elements characterize Modi's effort to change India's strategy towards Pakistan.

First is the willingness to take risks. Unlike his predecessor, Manmohan Singh, Modi has been willing to make bold gestures in seeking peace or facing up to war. To his credit, Singh was eager to transform the relationship with Pakistan and took a number of initiatives. But he could not persuade his own party, the Congress, to share his enthusiasm. Despite many appeals from the then Pakistan Army chief, General Pervez Musharraf, Singh could not bestir himself to visit the neighbouring nation even once during his decade long tenure as Prime Minister. Modi is more in the mould of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who preceded Singh as the Prime Minister of India during 1998-2004, in taking risks for peace and war. Modi is also going beyond Vajpayee in breaking many of the conventional taboos on the peace process towards Pakistan.

Second, Modi has been more willing than his predecessors in seeking a fresh perspective on the negotiating framework with Pakistan. The collapse of the old economic order at home, the very different international environment after the breakdown of Soviet Union, internal pressures arising from the turmoil in the Kashmir Valley and Pakistan's new found levers inside India pushed Delhi into a corner at the turn of the 1990s. A deeply defensive India in the 1990s conceded if reluctantly that negotiations with Pakistan were necessary to resolve the impasse in Kashmir. If P V Narasimha Rao played for time, the governments of Deve Gowda and I K Gujral (1996-98) agreed to put Kashmir back on the negotiating table with Pakistan. The Shimla Agreement of 1972, Delhi believed, had brought the negotiations on Kashmir to a close and all that remained was to formalize the settlement by turning the Line of Control into an international border. The Pakistan Army, however, saw the Shimla Agreement as an imposition on Pakistan after the loss of Bangladesh in 1971. It also convinced itself that nuclear weapons had altered the balance of power in the Subcontinent, and that it could reopen the Kashmir question.

In January 2004, after a series of military crises, Vajpayee, negotiated the terms of a peace process with Gen. Pervez Musharraf that called for a resolution of the Kashmir dispute in a violence-free atmosphere. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ran with this baton and came close to resolving the disputes in Siachen and Sir Creek, negotiated an agreement on Kashmir, expanded economic engagement and people to people contact during 2004-07. If Singh could not wrap up the negotiations, Musharraf's decline and fall during 2007-08, his successor Gen. Ashfaq Kayani's reluctance to confirm the agreements reached under Musharraf, and the 26/11 terror attack on Mumbai dealt a body blow to the peace process. The attempts to revive the peace process during Singh's UPA-2 (United Progressive Alliance-2) government made some progress, for example an agreed road map on normalizing trade relations, but could not be consummated.

Modi came to office with the confidence that he could alter the terms of engagement through creative diplomacy with Nawaz Sharif, mounting pressure on the Pakistan Army and expanding his party's influence in Kashmir. If Modi's attempts met a number of stumbling blocks, the explosion of violence in Srinagar valley during the summer and fall of 2016 may have convinced Delhi that there is little prospect for productive engagement with Pakistan in the near term. Unlike his predecessors, Modi has not been willing to fudge the question of terror in the engagement with

Pakistan. He has insisted that Pakistan must address India's concerns on terror as a priority in any potential peace process. If his predecessors, if only reluctantly, accepted that they had no choice but to live with Pakistan's support for terror, Modi is betting that he can change that by escalating the conflict. Crossing the Line of Control was one element of Modi's strategy to put pressure on the Pakistan Army to end cross border terrorism.

That brings us to the third dimension of Modi's Pakistan policy – to rethink the conventional wisdom on the 'sanctity of the Line of Control'. Although Pakistan had continuously destabilized the parts of Kashmir under India's control since the late 1980s, Delhi seemed stuck in defending the immutability of the LoC. Modi has now ended that one-sided respect for LoC, by putting Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan into the political contestation with Islamabad. Whether it is merely a bargaining tactic to force Pakistan to settle along the LoC or not, Modi has opened the possibility for rethinking India's approach to the Kashmir conflict. After the cross-LoC raid at the end of September, Delhi affirmed that it was a one-time operation and that it was willing to work with Pakistan to counter terrorism in the region. At the same time, Modi's advisers have hinted that if Pakistan continues with its cross-border terrorism, Delhi will let the Indian Army cross the LoC in retaliation. If terrorism continues in Kashmir, it is possible to imagine that the LoC will no longer be a thin military line of separation, but a zone of protracted conflict. In pondering the idea of expanding the LoC into a zone of conflict, Modi is willing to look beyond the holy cow of Shimla Agreement.

Fourth, Modi has definitely broken from his predecessors by demonstrating the will for the 'horizontal escalation' of the conflict. The tradition has been to view the conflict with Pakistan within a narrow framework that focused in essence on two core issues—cross-border terrorism for Delhi, and, Kashmir for Islamabad. But by raising the question of Balochistan, Modi is now willing to go where no one in Delhi was prepared to since 1971, when India helped liberate Bangladesh. In fact the Indian emphasis in recent decades has been on ending the tragedy of map making. It insisted on settling territorial disputes with Pakistan on the basis of status quo. India's statements of support have been carefully limited to political references to human rights violations by the Pakistan Army; but it has the potential to create trouble for Islamabad in unprecedented ways. This of course invites the risk of Pakistan doing the same – of meddling in India's internal troubles

beyond Kashmir. Modi, however, appears to be betting that in such a game of destabilization he can do more damage to Pakistan, and that, this in turn might act as a deterrent.

Under Modi, India's horizontal escalation is not limited to Balochistan. Modi has also seized on the opportunity to deepen strategic collaboration with Afghanistan. If the previous governments in Delhi limited the nature of their relationship with Kabul to avoid provoking Rawalpindi, Modi is willing to take his chances. In stepping up defence cooperation with Kabul and working with it to put pressure on the Pakistan Army, Modi has lent a new dimension to India's geopolitics in the Northwest. The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's failed peace initiative towards Pakistan had made him an unexpected partner for Modi. Cross-border destabilisation is now an existential threat to Afghanistan. Ghani, therefore has been echoing Modi's concerns about Pakistan's cross-border terrorism and joined Delhi in withdrawing from the summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Islamabad at the end of November. Although the Pakistanis have often complained about India-Afghanistan strategic cooperation and the two-front dynamic that it could produce, Delhi has generally avoided getting drawn into the conflict between Kabul and Rawalpindi. It had put greater priority on normalizing ties with Pakistan rather than confronting Islamabad through greater collaboration with Kabul. Modi, in contrast, appears willing to explore those possibilities.

Fifth, the boldest part of Modi's new approach has not been horizontal escalation, but in the more demanding vertical dimension. The cross-LoC attacks by the army demonstrate the will to intensify the conflict with Pakistan into a full blown military confrontation, including its nuclear dimension. To be sure, India in the past had occasionally sought to escalate the confrontation vertically, as it did during 2001-02, following the terror attack on the Indian Parliament. India's full military mobilisation, *Operation Parakram*, put pressure on the United States to compel Gen. Musharraf to formally commit Rawalpindi to end support for anti-India terror groups. The confrontation did lead to a period of reduced cross-border violence and a productive moment in the peace process. A ceasefire all along the frontiers of India and Pakistan held for a while after it was unveiled at the end of 2003. There were purposeful negotiations on Kashmir, and an expansion of trade and popular contacts. That period came to an end in November 2008 with the terror attacks on Mumbai. Amidst the resurgence of cross-border violence, Delhi struggled to come up with a

strategy to stop the Pakistan Army from organizing these attacks or nurturing groups hostile to India.

Modi has now taken the first step to break out of that box. Underlying all this is the bet that Delhi can afford to escalate the confrontation vertically. Many in India and the world have cautioned against the costs of such escalation. Modi, however, has a good appetite for risks. Unlike the Congress Party, which played safe on both war and peace with Pakistan, Modi has taken a series of risks with Pakistan. Many view his latest gamble of courting escalation in the confrontation with Pakistan as reckless. But it is not without some calculation.

India is much better placed in the world today than in the 1990s. This gives Modi greater confidence that he can manage the diplomatic fall out from an escalation. As one of the fast growing economies with significantly improved relations with the great powers, Delhi now has less reason than before to fear that the world will breathe down its neck in the event of a confrontation with Pakistan. Meanwhile, the world's patience with Pakistan's support for terror has worn thin. After the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is little enthusiasm in the US and the West for fixing the world's problems. Thanks to George W Bush and Barack Obama, Washington has learnt to control its Kashmir itch. Pakistan's supporters in the Muslim world too are deeply divided today and focused on their own internal and regional conflicts. Delhi's pre-emptive cross-LoC counter-terror attacks have been complemented by a proactive diplomacy that has sought to win new friends for India as well as weaken potential international support for Pakistan as the current crisis unfolds. Modi has the political confidence as well as international credibility to play the global concerns to India's advantage. Modi's new level of comfort with the US has been of great help.

Modi's risky approach will not automatically compel the Pakistan Army to end its support to cross-border terrorism in India especially in Kashmir. In devising and projecting the cross-border raids as a limited offensive to counter terrorism rather than a direct confrontation with Pakistan, Modi may have won the first round; but his challenge will become harder in the coming days. Maintaining effective control over the pace, direction and scope of the conflict with Pakistan is not going to be easy. Developing a strategy for proportional military responses to Pakistan's cross-

border terror attacks in Kashmir will be hard. Preventing the Pakistan Army from rallying the nation under its banner against India is a key objective for Modi. But that is complicated by jingoism whipped up by Indian social media, and the politicization of the conflict at home. Yet, there is no denying that Modi's stronger internal political standing and the changed international circumstances have given him some room to explore ways out of the prolonged deadlock with Pakistan.

Whether he succeeds or not, the dynamic between the two countries that has evolved over the last quarter of a century may not survive the present crisis. For nearly three decades, Delhi has struggled to break out of the corner that it had found itself with Islamabad—unable to compel Pakistan to give up cross-border terrorism either through threats or inducements. Modi has begun to strengthen the coercive element along with the demonstration of a strong commitment to peace diplomacy. That Modi wants to change the paradigm of engagement with Pakistan is not in doubt. Many at home and abroad remain sceptical. But the old framework has been under considerable strain for quite some time. Modi's new thinking on Pakistan could well turn out to be the last straw that broke the camel's back.

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