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Time for a ‘Reset’ of Pakistan-India Ties

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For long Pakistan’s relations with India, its sibling, were based on two considerations: Pakistan’s claim over Kashmir and its perception that there were powerful elements within the Indian establishment who, even almost seven decades after Partition, were not reconciled to the division of the Indian subcontinent. What have been called the ideas of Pakistan and India are based on very different definitions of nationhood by the founding fathers of the two states. For India, its future depends on its ability to accommodate dozens of different religious, linguistic and social groups within one nation. Pakistan, on the other hand, was created to provide a homeland for the Muslims of British India.² India was to be an inclusive state; Pakistan an exclusive one.

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² The idea of India was portrayed by historian Sunil Khilnani in his well-received book, *The Idea of India*, New York, Farrar, and Giroux, Straus, 1999. For Pakistan, see Stephen Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

It was inevitable that these two concepts of nationhood would clash and they often did. Since 1947 when the two countries emerged from the long rule of the subcontinent by the British, they have fought three wars. Two of them – in 1948 and 1965 – were over the disputed territory of Kashmir. The third, in 1971, brought the Indian Army to East Pakistan in support of the secessionist forces in Pakistan's eastern wing. The Indian intervention contributed to the creation of the independent state of Bangladesh. On several occasions, the two nuclear-armed states, unable to resolve differences over a number of contentious matters, massed millions of troops on the two sides of the long common border. It took active American involvement to prevent all-out war between the two nations on at least two occasions, in 1991 and 1999. Will the future be any different from the past? The answer is probably 'yes'; and the reason for this is that two men with similar dispositions have now ascended to the top of the political ladder in the two countries.

The enormous domestic changes brought about by the recent elections in the two countries – on 11 May 2013 in the case of Pakistan, and spread over a period of several weeks in April-May 2014 in the case of India – will, most likely, impact positively on the relations between the two states. The Pakistani election brought back to power, as Prime Minister, Mian Nawaz Sharif, head of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). This was the third time he was elected to the top position in Islamabad. The PML(N) won decisively in the national poll and in Punjab, the country's largest province, unseating the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) that had governed the country for five years (2008-13). The PML(N) won 166 seats in the National Assembly of 342 members. The rival PPP, with 44 seats, was reduced to a minor presence in the national legislature.

In India's case, the 2014 elections have placed Narendra Modi in the Prime Minister's Office in New Delhi. Modi won decisively as the head of a coalition dominated by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. The size of his victory meant that he could form a government on his own without drawing on the support of minor parties. India's two national parties, the BJP and the now-defeated Congress, had appealed to different segments of the electorate. The Congress chose to focus on the rural poor who number more than 200 million. When in power, it had pushed through Parliament a food subsidy bill that established a legal right to food for most Indians, which would cost the exchequer as much as US\$ 20 billion annually. During the poll campaign, the BJP had pinned its hopes on what some commentators have called the restless generation of "churning, aspirational India". The BJP's political triumph was the result of the rise of the middle class. But that was not all:

“The nation’s poor have changed, adopting attitudes and concerns long associated with the middle class. Indians are moving in huge numbers, but even those who remain in villages, surfing the internet on cheap smart phones, are drawing closer to the way city-dwellers think”.³

What would Modi’s ascent to power in India mean for South Asia, in particular for Pakistan? There are two different answers to this question. Islamabad-New Delhi relations could become difficult if Modi projects his professed Hindu nationalism into external affairs. Or if he chooses to focus on the economic and social development of India, he could work towards lessening tensions with his country’s two Muslim-majority neighbours, Bangladesh and Pakistan. There are good reasons to believe that he will opt for the latter course. As Annie Gowen wrote for *The Washington Post* on the eve of the announcement of results by the Indian Election Commission, “in the past 12 years, Narendra Modi has transformed his arid state into a model of what some believe India can become – a place of wide, smooth roads, electrified villages, rising incomes and brand-name foreign investment...On the stump, Modi promised a new India, with an efficient government free of corruption. He pledged to build bullet trains, hydroelectric power plants, manufacturing hubs and dozens of cities, enabling India to rival China, the economic powerhouse next door”.⁴

Under Modi’s watch, the state of Gujarat in India saw the size of the economy increase at China-like rate of growth of 10 per cent. However, the model he followed was anything but Chinese. Whereas Beijing had put the state on the commanding heights of the economy, Modi in Gujarat relied heavily on private sector activity. The government concentrated on improving the investment climate for private entrepreneurship, which included investment in infrastructure, but largely stepped out of the way of private entrepreneurship. Would this approach work for India? Most analysts agree that the job would not be easy. According to Ellen Barry of *The New York Times*, “in Gujarat, Modi has faced little opposition, with his Bharatiya Janata Party in power since 1995. He sidelined his rivals, limited news media access and tolerated little dissent, critics note. Such control will be harder to assert throughout India, with its powerful regional satraps, diverse cultural and noisy cable-news culture”.⁵

³ Ellen Barry, “Hopes of a restless generation are riding on India’s elections,” *The New York Times*, 16 May 2014, pp. A1 and A12.

⁴ Annie Gowen, “Reality could derail Modi’s dreams for India,” *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2014, pp. A1 and A6.

⁵ Ellen Barry, “Hopes of a restless generation are riding on India’s elections,” *The New York Times*, 16 May 2014, pp. A1 and A12.

It is interesting to note that the electorates in the two countries gave the same message to the people and the parties they put in power. What mattered was not religiosity but the promise of economic betterment. Modi may have used religious symbols more openly than was the case with Nawaz Sharif when both campaigned for votes. What drew voters to both of them were their promises for better governance, rapid and inclusive economic growth, and focus on economics in fashioning foreign policy. Both would like to concentrate their energies on developing national economies rather than pursue unattainable goals in relation to their neighbours. Both have the political power and authority to reorient the direction of public policy. In my conversation with Lal Krishna Advani in the winter of 2007, the veteran BJP leader made the point that “peace between India and Pakistan will be brought about by a BJP government; not by a government led by Congress”. To my question whether he was suggesting a “Nixon in China” approach by his party, he responded by saying that, that was indeed the case. However, Prime Minister Modi will need to overcome considerable hesitation on the part of some of the senior policy makers in the Indian capital about actively engaging Pakistan. When, in the summer of 2010, I presented the main findings of my work on regionalism in South Asia at a seminar in New Delhi, some of those in the audience – mostly retired senior members of the Indian diplomatic corps – were sceptical about my enthusiasm for promoting economic contacts in the South Asian region. According to some, “Pakistan was not seen as an opportunity but was viewed as a problem”.⁶

Sharif’s record in office – the signing of the Lahore Declaration in 1999 with the-then Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee – is good evidence of his approach towards India. His first major act in office, after becoming Prime Minister for a third time last year, was to send a message to Manmohan Singh, his then Indian counterpart, that he wanted to reset relations with India, with economic interests the main drivers of change. The Indian response at that time was lukewarm, probably affected by election politics. With the elections now over, it is likely that the new Modi government in New Delhi would be willing to work with its neighbour so that it is not distracted by foreign affairs as it focuses its entire attention on domestic economic policies.

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⁶ The reference here is to the discussion on my book, *South Asia in the New World Order*, Routledge, London, 2011.