

Modi's Peace Overture: Genuine or a Trojan Horse?

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The recent thawing of relationship between the two bitter rivals in South Asia should be welcomed by the international community and a majority of the citizens on either side of the divide. That the initiative has emanated from the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a confirmed Pakistani basher is a surprise and has raised eyebrows in Pakistan. He is also a member of the [RSS, a variant of the right-wing almost fascist](#) Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation based on Hindutva philosophy targeting Islam. What has motivated the Indian PM from abruptly changing gears and offering an olive branch to Pakistan? Should she spurn the Indian peace overture suspecting a 'Trojan Horse'? Or should Pakistan reciprocate, albeit very cautiously, hoping it would lead to the end of extreme hostility dating back to the independence of the two sovereign states over seven decades ago? These are some of the introspections that are being hotly debated, discussed and analysed in Pakistan.

Attempts to mend fences between India and Pakistan has a long history of failures where each one was short-lived. Surprisingly, Pakistan after the turn of the century, under Presidents Pervez Musharraf, Asif Zardari and PM Nawaz Sharif, had made peace overtures to India during their respective tenures with little success. To better understand PM Modi's mindset, the political landscape in India since the past two decades needs careful study.

From 1998 to 2014, India was led by BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Indian Congress Manmohan Singh. President Musharraf and Asif Zardari's peace initiatives held some promise, but were derailed by events orchestrated by elements present on both sides of the divide, who are inimical to peace in the region, as they would become irrelevant. The raid on the Indian Congress in December 2000 nearly led to an all-out war between the two neighbours whose forces were deployed eyeball-to-eyeball; but eventually better sense prevailed and a possible nuclear Armageddon was averted. The Mumbai attack in December 2008 also brought them to the brink of war, which was prevented by international diplomacy.

Both Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh focused more on improving the national economy rather than baiting Pakistan and within a decade India had become an economic powerhouse. In Pakistan, on the other hand, particularly post Musharraf era, the national economy stagnated due to a combination of internal and external factors.

Narendra Modi assumed the leadership of BJP in 2013 based on his Hindutva policies in Gujarat where he was the Chief Minister. The massacre of Indian Muslims in his state was condemned worldwide, but in his Hindu constituency that holds an absolute majority nationwide, his fame soared. During the national electioneering campaign of 2014, Modi articulated his vision of regaining the glory that Hindu India had achieved under the ancient kingdoms of Asoka and Harsha. The concept of a Hindu India trashed the secular policy that was the cornerstone of the nation's founding fathers. The Indian Muslims and followers of other religions were aghast at the pronouncement, but a vast number of the Hindu population embraced it wholeheartedly. Modi's

promise of regaining the past glory of Hindus in the subcontinent resonated with the Hindu majority. He took over the reins of India following his party's election 2014 victory.

Modi's warmongering posture aimed at Pakistan and his own Muslim population led to renewed unrest, particularly in the Indian Held Kashmir. Besides Indian Muslims and Christians, his anti-secular stance had alienated a fair section of Hindus as well, who believed in secularism. A decline in BJP's popularity among the Hindu populace was unacceptable and the Hindu support base had to be rejuvenated. Either by coincidence or design the Indian Airbase at Pathankot was raided by a heavily armed group in January 2016. India immediately blamed Pakistan for the attack, while Pakistan refuted all charges and counterclaimed that the attack was very likely a false flag operation to justify a preplanned military action against it.

Indian headlines in late September 2016 revealed 'surgical strikes' by an elite Indian commando unit on militants across the Line of Control in Azad Kashmir where the alleged Islamic terrorist groups responsible for the Pathankot attack were killed, and the Pathankot attack was avenged. Pakistan denied any such event reporting a minor incident along the LOC where about half a dozen Indian soldiers were killed and one captured and the LOC was not breached. It described the exchanges ["as nothing more than cross-border firing, albeit in a more coordinated fashion and along the LOC."](#) International media failed to confirm the Indian claims. However, the Indian electronic and print media played ball with their government, painting the strikes as a major success despite the inability of the Indian military to provide any satellite or photographic imagery confirming the killing of the militants. The strategic strikes very likely failed to meet any of its stated objectives, yet the spin given by the Indian media provided a boost to the falling popularity of Modi and his BJP.

The next General Elections in India was planned for April 2019 and BJP's chances of regaining power had taken a hit because of poor governance. And then, out of the blue, the Pulwama attack occurred on 14 February 2019, when a convoy of vehicles carrying security personnel on the Jammu-Srinagar Highway was targeted by a vehicle-borne suicide bomber. [40 people, including the suicide bomber, were killed.](#) Pakistan was again painted as complicit, which it vociferously denied as it prepared itself for another Indian military misadventure.

In the early hours of 25 February 2019, a fleet of IAF Mirage 2000s escorted by fighters penetrated Pakistani airspace and attacked a seminary in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province that allegedly was a terrorist training camp. The Indian media the next morning triumphantly announced the attack had achieved its objective and over 200 'militants' responsible for the planning of the Pulwama attack residing in the seminary were decimated. The truth, however, was different. Pakistan took the local and international media personnel to the building that was the target and showed it standing tall with no visible damage. The 'Spice' smart bombs that were launched by the IAF Mirages had fallen a few hundred metres short of the target destroying some trees. There was no reported loss of human life.

The very next day, in broad daylight, the PAF unleashed its operation 'Swift Retort' where PAF Mirages and JF-17s armed with long-range stand-off guided missiles, along with the necessary

escort and support elements, put a number of Indian military targets including a Brigade Headquarters in their crosshair. Since the PAF was ordered to respond on a quid pro quo basis and because the Indian raid had not caused any human casualty, just short of impact, the missiles were diverted to impact vacant spaces adjacent to the actual sites.

The IAF was ready for the PAF's retaliatory attack and had their air superiority Mirages and SU-30s guarding any LOC intrusion. On discovering the PAF attack flotilla, the Indian fighters responded, and in the ensuing air battle, the PAF claimed it had shot down an IAF SU-30 and a Mig-21 fighter, while in the confusion, the Indian Air Defence shot down one of its own helicopters that had presumably been launched to rescue the downed pilots. India had to accept the loss of the Mig-21 and its pilot Wing Commander Abhinandhan as the aircraft wreckage had fallen just across the LOC in Azad Kashmir. Abhinandhan was apprehended by the Pakistan Army as a prisoner of war and he was released a few days later. The IAF announced that Abhinandhan had shot a PAF F-16 before he was brought down, surprisingly Abhinandhan to date has made no such claim after his repatriation.

International experts refuted the Indian claims and the consensus was the IAF had been thoroughly outmaneuvered and outsmarted by the PAF. That did not prevent the Indian media from spinning the story and painting a major victory for the IAF and PM Modi. The media strategy worked and Modi's falling reputation got a boost helping him to win the re-election with an even bigger margin.

Modi's belligerence against Pakistan in particular and Muslims in general, went up a notch at the start of his second term. In August 2019, he revoked Article 370 that gave Indian Held Kashmir (IHK) special status, just as he had promised during the election campaign. Pakistan responded by accusing India of flagrant violation of the UN mandate on Kashmir. The Indian action led to an increased uprising in the Kashmir Valley forcing India to commit more security forces to contain the unrest.

Six months later, the full impact of COVID-19 hit India. If the Indian economy was dented because of the increasing unrest in Kashmir, the mishandling of the pandemic by the Modi government sent it into a downward spiral. From an enviable growth rate, the country witnessed negative growth for the first couple of quarters in 2020. Since then, the growth rate has crept up. Bernstein predicts a 7% contraction, while the Asian Development Bank foresees a [+4.2% for financial year 2021](#), well below the near double-digit figures that were achieved by Modi's predecessors. The popularity of BJP and Modi as a result has suffered.

The law of diminishing return has by now set in on the strategy of Pakistan and Muslim-bashing that had earlier helped salvage Modi's declining approval, and the option of Pakistan baiting has become less attractive.

Perhaps the truism of Bill Clinton's famous quote 'it's economy stupid,' which he had uttered during the 1992 US Presidential campaign has finally dawned on the BJP strategists. Perhaps, they have realised warmongering and economic uplift do not go hand in hand. Perhaps,

Pakistan's marathon effort to expose the human rights violations against Muslims in the Kashmir Valley and the rest of India is bearing fruit. Perhaps, it has forced Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the two key OIC members and major trading partners of India, to speak up against the Indian Kashmiri Muslim genocide. Perhaps they have asked India to stop persecution of Muslims in India and try to reduce tensions with Pakistan. Perhaps, the USA is also leaning on India to mend fences with Pakistan whose support is considered essential in its efforts to pull out of Afghanistan without loss of face. Perhaps, all these factors in one way or the other have influenced Modi to extend the hand of friendship to Pakistan.

Assuming both parties are sincere, the road to normalization of relationship will be long and arduous, given their past acrimonious history. The elephant in the room is Kashmir. Pakistan wants plebiscite in accordance with the UN Charter on the Kashmir dispute, while India's default position is recognition of the LOC as the international border. In the current environment if India agrees to a plebiscite, the government will not survive a day. Similarly, accepting the LOC as the international border by Pakistan will sound an immediate death knell of the ruling regime. Both options are not doable in the existing circumstances; only doable options should, therefore, be considered for implementation.

The ceasefire along the LOC agreed to by India and Pakistan is a good beginning. For the truce to last, both will have to control non-state actors and hardliners on their sides, who will go to any lengths to sabotage the deal. Similar ceasefires in the past were derailed by such elements. Moving forward will require a delicate balancing act by both. The Musharraf – Manmohan Singh initiative on Kashmir may be re-examined and certain aspects that are implementable could be revisited.

The revoking of Article 370 by India is a major stumbling block. For India to rescind the order is a big ask, but not an impossible one. Unless the status of IJK is restored as stipulated in Article 370 of the Indian constitution, no meaningful dialogue by Pakistan with India on the Kashmir issue can make headway. Pakistan alone does not have the necessary clout to force India to do so. India is coming under increasing pressure from the international forums, particularly the OIC to arrest its anti-Muslim policies, particularly in the Kashmir Valley. Only when India realises use of brute force to subdue the freedom struggle is a losing option, it will consider alternate strategies to deal with the issue.

Trade and commerce between the two nations must not be held hostage to a full resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Both can take a leaf from China and Taiwan where despite their irreconcilable differences, a flourishing trade exists between them. It should be kept in mind though that given the economic disparity in favour of India and its stronger industrial base, an open and free trade between the two could seriously undermine Pakistan's economy. Similarly, India would be reluctant to import products from Pakistan which could damage its own local industries or business. However, there may still be plenty of other business and trade opportunities that would be mutually beneficial and these areas should be explored.

There were occasions in the past where the Indian and Pakistani leadership had wanted to reconcile their differences and turn over a new leaf. Unfortunately, they were held hostage to their respective public opinion where non-stop negative propaganda against each other for the past seven decades has resulted in their citizens considering the other as devil incarnate. The very restrictive travel permission between their citizens since 1965 has allowed the negative perception to persist. A handful of Indians and Pakistani citizens who were fortunate to visit the other side were pleasantly surprised to learn the so-called devils were just ordinary people meeting the challenges of life, much like they themselves.

The paranoia that every Indian and Pakistani aspirant applying for a visit visa is to be viewed as a potential spy or saboteur, and hence must be thoroughly grilled and only a handful should be granted permission, should be revisited. A more liberal visa policy is the need of the hour and if greater number of the populace are allowed to visit the other side, the negative perceptions will change. Only then, the two governments can move forward confidently, without fear of a public backlash.

Is there room for optimism about the Indian Prime Minister's peace initiative? The response by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan is encouraging and in the past, he had vowed that for every step forward taken by India, he will take two steps forward—a very brave promise, indeed. But given the enormous excessive historical baggage the two nations carry since their independence, any optimism must be tempered with reality. One can only hope and pray for the best. Indians and Pakistanis deserve better.

A veteran of the PAF, Jamal Hussain has been actively involved in literary work since his retirement. Besides his operational experience as a combat pilot, he is a graduate of Air Command and Staff College, USA and National Defence College (NDC) Rawalpindi, an instructor in NDC and has served as the Commandant of the Joint Services Staff College Pakistan. Author of two books on Air Power in South Asia and Nuclear Dynamics of South Asia respectively, and joint author of the book on Tribes of Pakistan published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing UK. He has over a hundred articles on defence and international relations published in newspapers and journals within the country and abroad. His paper "Pakistani Air Power" was one of the chapters in the book Handbook of Air Power published by Routledge Publishers in 2018.