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## Modi's More Muscular Foreign Policy?

Sumit Ganguly believes that Narendra Modi's new approach to dealing with Pakistan has three distinct elements — 1) working with India's other neighbors to put pressure on its rival; 2) responding vigorously to Pakistani 'provocations' along their disputed border, and 3) improving trade and commercial ties. See the analysis [here](#).

By Sumit Ganguly for ISN

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In May 2014, in a striking departure from precedent, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose to invite all the prime ministers from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his inauguration. Even his critics in India lauded this gesture and hoped that it was a portent of his government's interest in improving ties with India's immediate neighbors. Even the leader of India's fractious neighbor, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, attended the event.

In the wake of the meeting, the Modi regime also chose to revive the Foreign Secretary level talks with Pakistan to deal with a range of outstanding issues. However, on the eve of the talks in August 2014, despite his government's explicit warning to Pakistan to refrain from doing so, the Pakistani High Commissioner, Abdul Basit, chose to meet with the members of the Kashmiri separatist organization, the Hurriyat Conference. Past regimes, while unhappy with this practice, had overlooked such gestures. After expressing mild displeasure they had allowed the talks to proceed as planned. On this occasion, however, the new government swiftly called off the talks. The decision to terminate the dialogue signaled a significant departure from the attitude of previous regimes on matters pertaining to this fraught relationship.

### **Trust and mistrust**

Since then the Modi regime has made a concerted effort to improve ties with India's smaller neighbors. For example, in a remarkably deft move, it has resolved a series of minor but highly charged border disputes with Bangladesh. This settlement was far from trivial because it involved the acquiescence of more than one Indian state that borders Bangladesh and also required a constitutional amendment. Modi has also sought to mend fences with Sri Lanka especially in the wake of the emergence of a new regime following elections early this year. In the aftermath of a major earthquake in Nepal in April of this year his government moved with considerable dispatch to provide relief to many hapless victims.

All of these diplomatic moves suggest that after much palaver and considerable neglect of India's neighbors a regime in New Delhi takes their concerns seriously and is even prepared to make asymmetric concessions to improve relations at multiple levels. The exception to this new orientation

in the country's foreign policy, however, may well prove to be Pakistan. It is obviously beyond the scope of this brief analysis to provide even a sketch of the long, troubled history of the Indo-Pakistani relationship. However, suffice to say that it has long foundered on the central issue of the disputed status of the border state of Jammu and Kashmir. Owing to its irredentist claim to the state, Pakistan has initiated three wars (1947-48, 1965 and 1999) to seize the territory. None of these efforts have brought it any closer to the realization of its goal. Interestingly enough, the 1971 war, which was not over Kashmir but stemmed from the exigencies of Pakistani domestic politics, and led to the break-up of the country, did not lead to an end to Pakistan's quest to appropriate the state.

Nor, for that matter, have either multilateral or bilateral negotiations proved any more productive in resolving the dispute. Most recently, in the wake of a major crisis in 2001-2002 the two sides undertook a substantial bilateral dialogue that lasted several years. No official account of what was accomplished in this so-called composite dialogue has yet been released. However, there are a number of press reports that suggest that the two sides arrived at a four-point formula that might have served as the basis for conflict resolution. Briefly stated, the blueprint called for local self-governance, the demilitarization of the region, the joint management of a number of functional issues and the eventual easing of travel restrictions across the border. No actual territorial compromise, however, was envisaged under the terms of this plan.

Of course, it is far from clear if the former Pakistani military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, who is widely credited with having generated the scheme, actually enjoyed the support of the corps commanders of the Pakistani military needed to implement it. The point, however, is moot as, with Musharraf's ouster in 2007 following a series of domestic protests, the dialogue stalled. In the aftermath of the major terrorist attack on Bombay (Mumbai) in November 2008, the dialogue was effectively terminated. Much evidence implicated the members of a Pakistan-based terrorist network, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), in the attack. Following the incident, despite the fitful efforts of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime in New Delhi to revive the talks, the dialogue always lacked serious momentum. Most importantly, the civilian regime of President Asif Ali Zardari in Pakistan, which assumed power after the end of General Musharraf's rule, was under the watchful eye of the overweening Pakistani military, and not in any position to make credible commitments to New Delhi.

### **A new approach?**

The Modi regime, which had sent an initial signal about its interest in resuming the dialogue, now seems to have hardened its position yet again. The most recent episode that has undermined the prospects of a renewed set of discussions took place after a seemingly cordial meeting between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and his counterpart, Mr. Modi, at Ufa in Russia on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) conference in early June. Following the meeting an agreement was reached that the National Security Advisers of the two countries would meet to discuss a range of outstanding issues.

However, the apparent bonhomie has not lasted. In mid-July Indian press reports indicated that Pakistani forces had initiated hostilities along the Line of Control (LoC), the *de facto* border in Kashmir. The Pakistani press, as well as the government, claimed that an Indian drone had crossed into Pakistani territory and had been shot down. Indian authorities, for their part, claimed that the drone was not of Indian military origin but was simply an off-the-shelf item of Chinese commercial technology.

Based upon discussions with key officials in New Delhi it is apparent that the Modi regime has arrived at a new approach to dealing with Pakistan and that it has three distinct prongs. First, it involves working with all of India's neighbors to enhance cooperation across a range of areas. Pakistan, of course, is at liberty to participate in these ventures. If it chooses not to, India will simply move ahead

with its efforts to engage other neighbors, leaving Pakistan increasingly isolated. Second, it will respond with vigor to any provocative Pakistani actions along the disputed border. The tough-minded Indian response in following the latest Pakistani firing across the border is indicative of a changed stance. Third and finally, on a more conciliatory note, to the extent that the regime in Pakistan appears willing to pursue practical initiatives such as improving trade and commercial ties, India will respond favorably.

Domestic critics of the Modi regime have not responded favorably to this new muscularity in India's approach toward Pakistan. However, given that the government enjoys a clear parliamentary majority, that substantial numbers of India's citizenry have little patience with Pakistani aggravation on the Kashmir question and the ideological proclivities of its leadership, the country may well be witnessing a significant shift in how it conducts its foreign and security policies toward its nettlesome neighbors, most notably, Pakistan.

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