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**Stalemate continues**

With the ‘India Chronicles’ and revelations by Foreign Minister Qureshi that New Delhi could be planning a surgical strike, India-Pakistan tensions are back in the headlines. Will the incoming Biden administration take notice?

Not an easy question to answer, as the future of the relations is largely in the hands of Indian Prime Minister Modi for whom his Pakistan policy is serving interests that go well beyond Washington’s policies and influence.

Modi’s plan regarding relations with Pakistan is clearly part of a new paradigm of India’s domestic and foreign policies. His foreign policy has fortified the trend that began around 1991 – to enhance engagement with great powers, especially the United States, to help raise India’s economic weight, military potential, and diplomatic stature, and advance its hegemony in the region. But the Pakistan policy does not reflect the foreign policy alone. It responds equally to several domestic factors – the RSS-backed Hindutva ideology, electoral politics, and Kashmir.

Modi has followed a two-phase policy on Pakistan, corresponding to each term of office he has held. In his first term, the effort was on strengthening ties with the US. The centrality of a strong relationship with Washington to India’s foreign policy came to feed on India’s adversarial relationship with China and Pakistan, thus serving the shared interests of both the US and India.

Yet Modi did not want to start his tenure with a hostile posture towards Pakistan. He wanted to build enough support for his Pakistan policy within India as well as internationally. He knows well the power of modern media. The invitation to former PM Nawaz Sharif to his (Modi’s) swearing-in ceremony and the air dash to Lahore on Sharif’s birthday in December 2015 had a dramatic impact internationally, especially in Washington. It showed Modi as keen for good relations.

Modi’s real intentions and policy were the exact opposite, as seen from the fact that he used the flimsiest of excuses, like the Pakistan high commissioner to India’s meeting with Kashmiri leaders in August 2014, to call off the planned foreign secretaries talks. And later, post Pathankot in January 2016 and Uri in September 2016, he tried to show Pakistan as the spoiler to peace with India. The cancellation of talks with Pakistan and sabotage of the Saarc Summit brought the focus on Pakistan’s ‘behaviour’, while earning India praise internationally for its ‘restraint’.

At home the terrorist attacks, exploited by Modi through social media and a friendly electronic media, had triggered an enormous emotional response by the Indian citizenry. And his non-military response made India look like a victim. The terrorism issue helped Modi with the Indian military also as it broadens the scope of conflict with Pakistan and enlarges the concept of national security, elevating the military’s national profile.

Modi’s Pakistan policy was now beating to new national rhythms both domestic as well as international. Buoyed by the success of his strategy, he took a much harder line in his second phase, which came towards the end of his first term. Modi found out from his forward policy in the Pulwama incident that aggression worked as it helped to highlight Pakistan as having provoked the Indian response and thus responsible for provoking the risk of conflict. It would put the spotlight on Pakistan as a reckless actor endangering peace in the region.

Pulwama was the transition to the new approach dictated largely by his planned move to change the status of Kashmir. He knew that the success of the Kashmir cause depended on two factors – the strength of the insurgency and Pakistan’s support to Occupied Kashmiris. His strategy was three-fold: through the August 5, 2019 action decimate Kashmir’s identity, unleash extreme repressive measures, and make Pakistan irrelevant to the Kashmiri struggle forcing the population to ultimately bend to the Indian will.

Emboldened by the fact that he has got away with all his overreach so far, at home and abroad, Modi might try a new gambit with Pakistan to muddy the policy options for the Biden administration. He has increased the diplomatic and military risks for Pakistan. And to make the military threat credible he has stepped up tensions along the LOC. Of course, Pakistan has to make sure it does not get provoked; China will not come to Pakistan’s aid.

Will Modi talk with Pakistan? Frankly Modi’s brutal repression of Kashmiris has no room for compromise; hence no compulsion for dialogue. Since his national policies do not have high priority for the economy, Pakistan – especially an economically weak one – has little value for him as an economic partner.

Will the Biden administration take notice? Washington’s interest has always been in crisis management, not in conflict resolution. Even if it brings the two countries to the negotiating table – and that is all it can and will do – it will not achieve much. Real change will happen only if the US uses its leverage with India which it will not, unless there is a risk of war.

Modi might be interested in talks but only to make some false promises to Pakistan to make it back away from supporting the Kashmir cause and to demoralize the resistance. Pakistan should avoid such talks.

Meanwhile, both India and Pakistan may feel the US-China geopolitical competition and China-India rivalry, partly fueling their own tensions, have some value for them outweighing any peace dividend. India in hubris benefits from it, and Pakistan in complaisance feels it does not lose anything from it, hoping that Modi may have set up a trap for himself. And the stalemate continues.

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