**[Is re-engagement possible?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1838931/is-re-engagement-possible)**

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THE BJP’s electoral victory has [handed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1838884/modi-sworn-in-for-third-term-a-dozen-ministries-for-allies) Narendra Modi a third consecutive term in office. In a [closely fought election](https://www.dawn.com/news/1837916/modi-set-to-take-pm-oath-for-3rd-time-on-june-8-as-allies-pledge-support), the Congress party’s INDIA alliance made an unexpectedly strong showing. This left BJP short of a majority to form a government on its own and broke the myth of Modi’s invincibility.

Nevertheless, Modi cobbled together a majority with alliance partners to govern, but with a diminished mandate. He will head a coalition government and have to rely on wily and fickle [political allies](https://www.dawn.com/news/1838098/modis-allies-to-extract-pound-of-flesh-in-return-for-support) to survive in power. For a man unused to sharing power, dealing with coalition politics and regional kingmakers will be uncharted territory, as well as contending with a powerful opposition.

This challenging scenario will oblige Modi 3.0 to focus a great deal of attention on domestic political consolidation. That will likely see him double down on his Hindutva ideology to reinforce his Hindu base, especially as the BJP was mostly unable to make inroads beyond its strongholds. Modi and BJP’s vicious [anti-Muslim rhetoric](https://www.dawn.com/news/1829003) during the election campaign was more than just a tool of political strategy. It reflected party ideology and its deep-seated belief about the place of Muslims in ‘Hindu India’.

Its hard-line policy towards Muslims is therefore likely to continue. Coalition partners are unlikely to restrain the BJP in that regard. To consolidate its Hindu constituency, the Modi government might pursue with even greater vigour its Hindutva agenda, involving actions such as a uniform civil code, ending reservations for Muslims, and seizing [mosques in Varanasi](https://www.dawn.com/news/1810932) and Mathura to claim them as old temples. All these are part of its manifesto.

Related to this was the BJP’s resort to [Pakistan-bashing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1836208) in the election campaign. Modi compared his muscular response to cross-border terrorism with the infirm approach of his predecessors, saying he will continue to “hit terrorists in their homes” (“*Hum ghar me ghus ke marenge*“).His reference was to the [air strikes](https://www.dawn.com/news/1536224) he ordered on Balakot in February 2019 after a terrorist attack in Pulwama in occupied Kashmir. BJP leaders’ other pronouncements on Pakistan were equally belligerent and offensive. This too was part of the party’s strategy to appeal to its Hindu support base, having determined that the Pulwama episode had helped it reap rich electoral dividends in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Again, anti-Pakistan tirades were not just election politics but indicative of the combative approach the BJP government may adopt towards Islamabad. Moreover, domestic political problems will create the temptation to ramp up anti-Pakistan rhetoric and for Modi to further harden his Pakistan policy.

These factors do not create a propitious climate for India-Pakistan re-engagement and, in fact, limit the scope for a thaw in the frosty relationship. The path to normalisation of ties is in any case strewn with formidable difficulties. The diplomatic deadlock between the two neighbours has remained unbroken for the past five years.

Relations were ruptured when India [illegally annexed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1498227) Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, bifurcated it, and absorbed it into the Indian Union in brazen violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Formal dialogue was suspended by Delhi years earlier. And in February 2019, in the wake of the Pulwama crisis, India slapped [200 per cent customs duty](https://www.dawn.com/news/1465709) on Pakistani imports in a bid to restrict trade with Pakistan. Islamabad’s response to Delhi’s Kashmir action was to halt trade altogether and downgrade diplomatic relations by recalling its high commissioner.

There are many obstacles to a thaw in the frosty India-Pakistan relationship.

However, backchannel communication between them led in February 2021 to recommitment by both sides to observe a [ceasefire on the Line of Control](https://www.dawn.com/news/1609468) in Kashmir in accordance with a 2003 understanding. This was a significant development following the dangerous confrontation between the two countries in February 2019, when Indian air strikes in Pakistani territory pushed the two countries to the brink of conflict. Agreement on an LoC truce marked a much-needed de-escalation of tensions. The ceasefire has since mostly held. But expectations that this temporary thaw would pave the way for the resumption of a peace process did not materialise.

The diplomatic impasse has since persisted, with verbal clashes punctuating tense relations. Islamabad made the resumption of dialogue contingent upon India rescinding its August 2019 action. Delhi showed no interest in resuming talks, saying that Kashmir was off the negotiating table.

Instead, it continued its repressive policy and human rights violations in occupied Kashmir. Despite Pakistan’s protests, India proceeded in the next three years to undertake a slew of sweeping legal, demographic, and electoral changes in occupied Kashmir aimed at disempowering Kashmiri Muslims. This further vitiated the climate and left ties more fraught.

In May 2023, foreign minister [Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari visited India](https://www.dawn.com/news/1755854) to attend a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. But the opportunity for any re-engagement proved elusive as no bilateral meeting took place. Instead, the foreign ministers of the two countries [traded stinging barbs](https://www.dawn.com/news/1751042), while India’s foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, [accused](https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/s-jaishankar-calls-pakistans-bilawal-bhutto-spokesperson-for-terrorism-industry-4008992#:~:text=Foreign%20Minister%20S%20Jaishankar%20has,spokesperson%20of%20a%20terrorism%20industry%22.) Bilawal of being the “spokesperson of a terrorism industry”.

Meanwhile, another irritant was added last year to the long list of disputes between the two countries when India threatened to unilaterally modify the [Indus Waters Treaty’s dispute](https://www.dawn.com/news/1765738) settlement provisions. It also boycotted a court of arbitration hearing at the Hague on Indian hydroelectric projects on the Chenab and Jhelum rivers disputed by water-stressed Pakistan. The 1960 treaty has for over six decades survived wars, confrontations and tensions between the two countries, but Delhi’s stance put at stake the fate of this vital treaty that governs the sharing and management of trans-border rivers.

Against this fraught backdrop, the prospects for any normalisation of relations appear slim. There is certainly the need for a working relationship and regular communication — even by a back channel — to manage tensions. Norma­li­sa­tion of ties, however, has to be on a reciprocal and mutually beneficial basis.

For now, Delhi’s well-known terms for re-engagement — minus settlement of disputes — Modi’s hostile stance on Pakistan, and BJP leaders’ threats to seize Azad Kashmir, hold out little hope for any forward movement in bilateral ties.

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