

Realism Not Romanticism Should Dictate India's Pakistan Policy

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Wags have often compared India's policy towards Pakistan with the attitude of an abused wife who continues to harbour fond hopes that her tormentor will one day reform. Much like the abused wife, India's response to incessant provocations from Pakistan is limited to the occasional protest. And, just as the abused wife justifies sticking to the unhappy marriage because destiny has willed it so, India uses geography and an outdated concept of neighbours to desist from taking any step or making any policy that will address the Pakistan problem substantially, if not entirely.

Thus it is that even as reports emanating from Pakistan reveal that the Lashkar-e-Taiba openly threatened war after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Jaish-e-Mohammad hosted a huge rally under police protection in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on India's Republic Day, Pakistani troops once again violated the ceasefire along the LoC, and that the Pakistani delegation played the 'dehati aurat' (to use Nawaz Sharif's evocative phrase) to seek US intervention and involvement on its side against India not just in Kashmir but also in Afghanistan, the Indian press is reporting that the lame-duck Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a last throw of the dice (and perhaps throwing all caution to the winds) is planning to visit Pakistan just on the eve of elections.

Although it is entirely possible that other than some movement on the trade front, no other Napoleonic feat will be achieved during this purported trip. There is apprehension that the outgoing government might enter into some understanding or even agreement – speculation is rife about some sort of roadmap being agreed to resume the Composite Dialogue – that ties the hand of the next Prime Minister in how to engage with, or as the case may be, stay disengaged from, Pakistan. In other words, by undertaking a visit to Pakistan, the Indian PM could well be laying a diplomatic and strategic minefield for his successor.

Whosoever forms the next government in New Delhi must have an opportunity to undertake a comprehensive review of India's Pakistan policy. Such exercise should not only question the hoary assumptions and shibboleths that have guided policymaking so far, but also forge a policy framework that sheds all starry-eyed notions based on extraneous considerations – personal friendships, ancestral links, family origins, childhood nostalgia, romantic notions of being the one to normalise relations to recreate the period of glorious co-existence (which actually never existed!), delusions of statesmanship which will be the toast of the world – in favour of a policy that protects and promotes India's economic, political, security and strategic interests. Hard-nosed and professional assessment based on ground realities, and not seductive and sugary statements from Pakistani leaders, must form the basis of any new policy.

Among the first things that the next government must do is get over the 'saviour' complex that has dogged India's Pakistan policy since Independence. Against the backdrop of US-led ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rising profile and power of both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban groups, immense pressure will come on the next government from sections within India to make concessions to Pakistan and rescue it from the existential crisis in which it finds itself. Such pressure to pull Pakistan's chestnuts out of the fire must be resisted. Simply put, Pakistan's existential crisis is of its own making and asking or expecting India to rescue Pakistan from itself is a mug's game. Innumerable times in the past India has become a victim to this 'saviour' complex only to repent later.

Out of all the outstanding issues between the two countries, the only area in which reasonable progress appears possible is trade. It is, however, important that the rationale for trade not be overstated. The political and diplomatic spin-offs resulting from bilateral trade are at best a fringe benefit and should not and cannot become the primary objective for opening trade. To put politics before economics in the context of trade would be akin to putting the cart before the horse. The two countries should open up trade for no other reason except that it makes economic sense and is beneficial for both sides. At the same time, political and security realities must be factored in while opening trade. The recent drugs haul in Kashmir and other instances of arms, explosives and narcotics being smuggled under the cover of overland trade should serve as a wake-up call to those who advocate throwing open the borders for traders. Similarly, adopting a cavalier attitude in easing travel and visa restrictions is inviting disaster. While it is true that subversives don't need visas to come across the border, it is equally true that there is no reason to make it easy for them to cross the border on readily available Indian visas.

The utility of people-to-people contacts should also not be overstated. No doubt, travel between the two countries will help in dispelling some of the myths and falsehoods that have been propagated over the years. But it will also reaffirm some of the stereotypes. The short point is that Indian policymakers must take into account the deep-seated prejudice and societal transformation that has happened inside Pakistan over the last nearly seven decades. This is not to deny that there are many Pakistanis with a lot of goodwill towards India; only these people, despite being very visible and vocal, don't call the shots. To make policy on the basis of interaction with these people and ignore the overwhelming majority that thinks and views India very differently and inimically would be a grave mistake. Indeed, many of the liberals inside Pakistan, perhaps unwittingly, play the good cop to soften and confuse opinion and discourse within India, while their establishment continues on its bad cop routine. What is more, many among this lot have also got insidiously warped in their world view. For instance, an iconic Pakistani editor of an English weekly who is seen by many in India and across the world as a rational and sensible person did not bat an eyelid in one of his TV programmes in claiming that the famed Lahore hospitality is not a Punjabi but an Islamic trait! This sort of comment betrays a mindset that will find it difficult to reconcile to the idea and reality of India.

India's Pakistan policy must not be based on statements emanating from Pakistan but on tangible steps that the Pakistani authorities take to address India's concerns. Apart from preparing a set of metrics to judge Pakistan's intentions and sincerity, the next government must resist the temptation of entering into any deal just for the sake of a deal. Interim settlements or a series of interim deals of the type envisaged on the back-channel between Musharraf and Manmohan Singh on issues like Jammu and Kashmir will be disastrous for India. This will mean that Pakistan will be free to reopen the issue at a time of its convenience and choosing. If there is a deal on offer, it must be of a permanent nature for India to accept it.

The next government must be open to the idea of grabbing a good deal if one is on offer. But there is no reason for India to go overboard in trying to seal a deal. In other words, if Pakistan desires parity with India, it should not expect 'magnanimity' from India, and if it expects 'magnanimity', then it should not insist on parity. Most importantly, India needs to understand that the future trajectory of relations will depend on whether or not Pakistan's animosity towards India outweighs its fear and revulsion of the Taliban. If Pakistan sees the Taliban as the problem, then prospects for a detente, and even normalisation, will improve tremendously. If, however, India remains the object of hate and the Taliban an ally or asset, then normalisation or even detente will remain a chimera. What course Pakistan chooses will become clear in the next first year of the next government in Delhi, by which time the new government should be able to review, re-evaluate and remake India's Pakistan policy.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.