

Article Title: “A whiff of detente: India bashing matters less in Pakistani politics, but remains mainstay of its foreign policy”

This article was published on ‘The Times of India’ on April 13th 2016

Shortlink: <https://goo.gl/d5mkl9>

Post Pathankot there was something different about the rigmarole of India’s engagement with Pakistan, but that phase seems to have run out of steam. By all accounts the relationship is back to its pathetic old normal, or perilously close to it. So, was it just déjà vu all over again, yet another Indian PM’s naiveté being exploited one more time by the other side? Not exactly.

What was new was in what was missing: instant blame and defensiveness. India did not, as is usual, jump to blame Pakistan, but methodically traced the attack back to the jihadi terror group, Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM). Neither did Pakistan instantly disclaim any involvement, and in fact, rather stunningly, also corroborated the link back to JeM. Although that was later withdrawn, contrast it with Pakistan’s long obfuscation on captured Mumbai attacker Ajmal Kasab.

There was also another aspect that was new. Even in track two dialogues, which are supposed to foster candour, Pakistani participants would in the past be defensive about their country’s links to terror. Any discussion on Pakistani links to attacks on the Indian embassy in Afghanistan, for instance, would be pooh poohed. And links between Pakistan’s “deep state” and terrorist outfits would be dismissed as being in the distant past, followed by the now routine “Pakistan is the biggest victim of terror” dodge.

But at a track two dialogue last month, there was a refreshing difference. Rather than being dismissive or defensive about Pakistani links to the Pathankot attack, there was indeed the hoped for candour. It struck some Indian interlocutors that this time their Pakistani counterparts, instead of just papering over their military’s contradictory interests, were far more open to acknowledging the facts on cross-border terrorism, and perhaps even cooperating with India against this scourge.

Now it appears all that was too good to be true. But of course, this should have been expected, say many. The Pakistani deep state’s perfidies are not new, and India should have kept in mind the betrayals of Kargil, Mumbai and many others that have followed every new initiative.

The resistance by Pakistan’s deep state to any real breakthrough with India can be understood from the cliché that while most countries own an army, in Pakistan it is the army that owns a country. Tellingly, UK newspaper Guardian cited Pakistani author Ayesha Siddiqi on how “Five giant conglomerates, known as ‘welfare foundations’, run thousands of businesses ... (including) military-run bakeries, banks, insurance companies, and universities.”

According to American South Asia expert Kathryn Alexeeff, “Pakistan’s military has extensive economic power ... this has numerous negative implications, not least of which is that it makes long-term successful economic reforms nearly impossible.” Therein lies the crux of the problem, holding Pakistan back from the goals of peace, growth and prosperity, since that would inevitably, drastically curtail the military’s dominance.

Though some have suggested that India should, therefore, bypass Pakistan’s civilian government and directly build a bridge with its military, that has never been accepted by India. And rightly so, for the fundamental disconnect is not between India’s and Pakistan’s interests, but between India’s and the Pak military’s.

Pakistan’s fragile democracy growing stronger roots is as much in India’s interest as Pakistan’s. And now, just three years after Pakistan’s first ever transfer of power through elections from one civilian government to another, is not the time to change tack on that core philosophy. India bashing has progressively mattered less and less in Pakistani elections and politics, but continues to be the bulwark of its defence and foreign policies, ultimately determined by you know who.

The evident rapport between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif is disconcerting to Pakistan’s deep state, just as similar, earlier bonhomie between Vajpayee and Sharif had been. And as Pathankot inevitably followed Modi’s visit to Lahore, the still enduring entente, with a Pakistani team visiting Pathankot, had to perform be disrupted.

Thus, the melodramatic arrest of an alleged Indian spy. All nations do intelligence gathering. But the Pak military has consistently tried to portray a false equivalence between its active support of cross-border Jihadi terror groups and India’s far more traditional intelligence activities.

As Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida has written on the spy saga, “The audience was internal ... The boys are talking to us ... ‘Pakistan, we’re on your side and we need you on ours’.”

In all this, China’s stymying of a UN resolution naming JeM chief Masood Azhar as a wanted terrorist was par for the course. Subsequently, Azhar has reportedly criticised Sharif but praised China, which is indicative of the struggle within Pakistan between the military and the civilians. That China uses Pakistan as a cheap option to act as a drag on India’s rise is no secret, and is something that must continue to guide our strategic thinking.

Clearly, the new normal was short lived. Nonetheless, there was more to it than mere déjà vu. The decades-old script was altered, even if briefly, which means it is not forever unalterable. In fact, even as this is being written, the two prime ministers have yet again picked up the phone, to commiserate on the latest tragedies in each other’s country. On balance, these past three months have seen the proverbial two steps forward, and one back.