

India-Pakistan tensions remain high, despite Modi's meeting with Sharif

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held bilateral talks with his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, on Tuesday, the day after his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government took office.

At Modi's invitation, Sharif had travelled to New Delhi to witness Modi's inauguration—an unprecedented first in the stormy relationship between the rival states created by the 1947 communal Partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Given the fraught character of Indo-Pakistani relations and Modi's reputation as a Hindu supremacist and anti-Pakistan hardliner, Tuesday's meeting between Modi and Sharif was certain to capture international attention. There is nothing to suggest, however, that the meeting achieved anything apart from yet another bi-lateral pledge to try to restart the countries' long-stalled "comprehensive peace dialogue."

At the meeting's conclusion, there was no joint press conference, nor even a joint communique. Modi, it was later reported, has accepted an invitation to visit Pakistan at an unspecified future date. The countries' Foreign Secretaries—that is, their highest-ranking professional diplomats—have been instructed to meet to discuss improving bilateral ties. But again no date or even prospective time-frame for such a meeting has been set.

Modi's predecessor, Mammohan Singh, repeatedly put off visiting Pakistan, largely because his Congress Party feared that the BJP would vehemently protest such a step. Singh ended his ten years as prime minister without ever visiting Pakistan.

Sharif, for his part, had to secure the agreement of Pakistan's military, with which he is currently locked in a very public power struggle over control of the country's foreign and internal security policies, before accepting Modi's invitation.

While both sides painted Tuesday's meeting as a success, their post-meeting comments pointed to their rival agendas.

India insisted the meeting had focussed on its demands that Pakistan cease support for Islamicist terrorist groups and secure the quick conviction of those—including some with links to Pakistan's national-security apparatus—currently on

trial in Pakistan for their role in the 2008 Mumbai terrorist atrocity. India has long painted the insurgency against Indian-rule in Jammu and Kashmir as well as the growth of Islamicist terrorist groups elsewhere in India in the wake of the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid as almost entirely the product of the machinations of Pakistan's national-security apparatus. India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir is claimed by Pakistan and has been the key issue in two of three wars the countries have fought.

"We told Pakistan that we want good relations," Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said Wednesday. "But ... the voice of talks gets lost in the sound of bomb blasts."

Modi, said Swaraj, had bluntly told Sharif, "Talks will get subdued under the din of bomb blasts."

Sharif, in what were brief comments to the press, said that he had emphasized the need to strengthen Indo-Pakistani economic ties. Responding indirectly to India's trumpeting of the terrorism issue, he added, "I urge that we should not engage in accusations and counter-accusations."

India's ruling elite is acutely aware that it enjoys a huge strategic advantage over Pakistan because of the rapid growth of India's economy during the past two decades and its burgeoning "strategic partnership" with the US; and it is determined that any "normalization" of relations with Islamabad reflect this.

In a move aimed at asserting Indian leadership over the region, Modi invited not just Sharif, but the heads of government of all the other member-states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his inauguration. And whilst his meeting with Sharif took center-stage, Modi also met with the other SAARC leaders Tuesday, including Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai.

The Pakistani press was strongly supportive of Sharif's acceptance of Modi's invitation to visit, but following Tuesday's meeting voiced concern that so little had been accomplished and at the price of the Indian prime minister burnishing his credentials as a statesman.

In an editorial titled, “Pak-India: more of the same,” the *Dawn* said, “Modi has cleverly bought himself goodwill internationally, by hosting Sharif, but did so in a way that really conceded nothing.

“The invitation itself was one to SAARC leaders and the selective leaks to the media after the prime ministerial meeting yesterday suggested that Modi stuck to a hawkish script instead of a more peaceable one.”

The *News* said, “The two leaders have done what no one expected but the chances of reverting back to script still remain high.”

The US welcomed the Modi-Sharif meeting. State Department spokesman Jen Psaki said Washington encourages “any and all steps India and Pakistan take to strengthen their dialogue and cooperation.” “We are cautiously hopeful (the meeting) could be a positive indicator,” said a “senior” Obama administration official in a not-for-attribution comment.

Since the late 1990s, the US has frequently intervened to try to defuse crises in Indo-Pakistani relations. But its own aggressive actions in Asia and the Middle East are a huge factor in exacerbating tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, to say nothing of the broader region.

As part of its campaign to isolate Iran and cripple its economy, the US forced India to withdraw from a plan to build a natural gas pipeline from Iran via Pakistan—a project that was meant to underpin the Indo-Pakistani “comprehensive peace process” initiated in 2003, little more than a year after the two countries had again come to the brink of war.

With the aim of encircling China and thwarting its rise, the US has been aggressively courting India, making it a “global strategic partner” and declaring its readiness to help India become a world power. This has included providing New Delhi access to civilian nuclear technology, thus allowing it to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development, and offering India advanced weaponry available only to its closest allies.

The US’s promotion of India—as part of its anti-China “Asian Pivot”—has upset the military balance of power in South Asia, causing Pakistan to take high-risk counter-measures such as developing battlefield tactical nuclear weapons.

Islamabad has also been alarmed by Washington’s encouragement of a growing Indo-Afghan partnership that includes Indian training of Afghan security forces. For decades, the Pakistani military has looked to Afghanistan to provide it “strategic depth” in its reactionary conflict with India, but it now fears that Afghanistan can provide its rival with a new base of operations from which to threaten Pakistan. Islamabad has charged that India is using its

network of consulates in Afghanistan to provide support to an ethno-separatist insurgency in Pakistani Baluchistan.

During his India visit, outgoing Afghan President Karzai repeated his charge that last week’s attack on the Indian consulate in Herat in western Afghanistan was carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistan-based Islamicist militia. LeT has rejected the charge.

Large sections of India’s corporate elite and military security establishment are pressing for India’s new government to further strengthen India’s alliances with US and Japanese imperialism as a means of bridging the “strategic gap” between India and China.

Such a development would only further exacerbate Islamabad’s fears. Moreover, with Pakistan likely to respond by trying to deepen its “all-weather alliance” with China, it could lead to the US-China and Indo-Pakistani conflicts becoming intertwined, adding a highly explosive new dimension to both.

While Modi has said little thus far about Indo-US relations, his government has signaled that it intends to dramatically increase military spending so as to accelerate the Indian military’s massive weapons acquisition program.

Even as Sharif was visiting India, the new BJP government was stirring up a major, communally-motivated, controversy over the status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). On Tuesday, Minister of State Jitendra Singh said that the new government wants to begin debate on abrogating Article 370 of India’s constitution, which gives J&K a unique status with the Indian Union. The BJP has long denounced Article 370 as an incitement to separatism. But when its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has previously formed India’s government, the BJP could not act on this issue because it was dependent on its NDA partners for its parliamentary majority.

The pro-Indian Kashmiri political elite has denounced the BJP’s attack on Article 370 in the strongest terms. J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah said that either Article 370 will remain or Kashmir will no longer be part of India, while the head of the rival Peoples’ Democratic Party, Mehbooba Mufti warned, “we are moving towards another (communal) partition and division.”



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