

# India's Modi makes surprise visit to Pakistan

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an apparently impromptu visit to Lahore to meet his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, on December 25. The visit was the first by an Indian prime minister to Pakistan in well over a decade.

It took observers by surprise, not just because it did not appear on the itinerary of the Indian prime minister, who spent December 23 and 24 in Moscow and then travelled to Kabul to help inaugurate the Indian-constructed Afghan parliament building.

Only in recent weeks have Modi and his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government pulled back from a highly provocative policy of refusing all high-level diplomatic engagement with Islamabad until it cedes to Indian demands that it renounce “support for terrorism.”

The year 2015 saw the worst border skirmishes between South Asia's two nuclear-armed states in more than a decade. Further exacerbating tensions were bloodcurdling war threats issued by both Indian and Pakistani political and military leaders.

India's corporate media has been quick to hail Modi's Pakistan trip as a diplomatic coup.

In fact, it was a pragmatic maneuver, aimed at placating Washington and shoring up the increasingly embattled Modi government domestically.

Under Modi, India has tilted further to the US and become even more closely integrated into Washington's anti-China “pivot to Asia.” At the same time, Modi has sought to assert India's claim to be the regional hegemon, and this has necessarily meant a policy of confrontation with Pakistan.

While the Obama administration has lavished India with armaments and help in implementing its economic and military-strategic “Look East” policy, it became increasingly concerned in recent months that Indian belligerence was disrupting its plans to have Pakistan help broker peace talks between the Taliban and the

Afghan government. These talks are supposed to begin as early as next month.

Publicly, Washington did not criticize India for boycotting talks with Pakistan, but US Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken made a number of increasingly worried comments last autumn about the possibility of war erupting between India and Pakistan.

In an interview with the *Indian Express* earlier this month, Blinken said he feared a terrorist attack in India could “spark off a large-scale conflict” with Pakistan, adding, “The only thing worse than an intentional conflict is an unintentional conflict, where an incident sparks something and it spirals out of control.”

The US diplomat went on to publicly press for the renewal of diplomatic engagement between New Delhi and Islamabad. The war danger, he said, “is one of the reasons why it is so important, in our judgment, that India and Pakistan find ways to communicate, to reduce tensions, and ultimately to find a more cooperative relationship.”

Of course, Blinken omitted mention of the fact that a key factor in destabilizing Indo-Pakistan relations has been the US drive to integrate India into its military-strategic offensive against China. This has included offers to jointly develop and produce advanced weapons systems and a civilian nuclear deal that gives India access to foreign nuclear fuel and technology, allowing it to focus its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

While Washington's prodding is obviously behind the sudden turn in New Delhi's relations with Pakistan from confrontation to apparent rapprochement, the official narrative is that it can all be traced back to a chance 167-second November 30 encounter between Modi and Sharif on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Change Conference.

This allegedly led to a December 6 meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, between India's national security

advisor, Ajit Doval, and his Pakistani counterpart, Nasir Khan Janjua, which was publicly disclosed only after the fact.

The successful conclusion of the national security advisors' meeting made it possible for India to send External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Islamabad to attend the latest session of the multilateral "Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process" on December 8.

While the US is not formally part of this conclave, it made clear that it saw the meeting, which brought together diplomats from Afghanistan and all of its neighbors and near neighbors, including Russia, China, Iran and India, along with several Gulf States, as important for moving toward a "political settlement" to the Afghan war.

While in Islamabad, Indian External Affairs Minister Swaraj met with Prime Minister Sharif, and the two subsequently announced the launching of a "Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue" between India and Pakistan, in which all outstanding issues, including the fate of the disputed Kashmir region, will figure.

The "Bilateral Dialogue" is, in fact, a new name for the "Comprehensive Peace Dialogue" that was launched in 2003 and which has been effectively stalled since India suspended it in December 2008 in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attack.

By visiting Sharif on Christmas Day, Modi has given his personal stamp of approval for the thawing of relations with Pakistan, winning praise from Washington, which was no doubt less enthused by the first leg of his trip. That took Modi and a large delegation of Indian businessmen to Moscow. While there, Modi reaffirmed the importance of the Indo-Russian strategic alliance and signed a number of significant arms deals.

Modi's surprise visit to Lahore also allows him to demonstrate that he is firmly in charge and capable of dramatic action at a time when his 19-month-old government is increasingly being criticized by big business for its failure to restore India's high growth rate and its hesitation in pushing through pro-investor labor and land-ownership reforms in the face of popular opposition.

Sections of the business elite, as reflected in such corporate mouthpieces as the *Times of India* and the *Hindustan Times*, had also been urging Modi to reconsider his hard-line stance against all engagement

with Pakistan, arguing that it had brought no substantive dividends and was a distraction from the government's economic "reform" agenda.

While a meeting of the Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries is apparently in the works for early in the new year, there is nothing to indicate that Modi's visit accomplished anything apart from a media splash. The Indian prime minister arrived in Lahore with an entourage of top-level foreign and military security officials, but their Pakistani counterparts were not available for talks. It would not appear that this was a deliberate snub, but rather a result of the lack of advance preparation for the visit.

Previously, however, the Pakistani military worked to subvert Sharif's attempts to lessen tensions with India. With Washington's tacit support, the top brass of the Pakistani military have over the past two years wrested back control of the country's foreign and national security policies from the civilian government.

Modi, meanwhile, has made a political career out of posturing as a Hindu strongman and issuing vows to put Pakistan in its place.

The reactionary Indo-Pakistani geo-political conflict is rooted in the suppression of the anti-imperialist revolution in South Asia by the colonial bourgeoisie and the communal partition of British India in 1947 between a Hindu-dominated India and a Muslim Pakistan.

This conflict, which has become central to the respective ideologies of the rival bourgeoisies, has over the course of the past decade become increasingly entangled with Washington's drive to sustain and expand its domination of Eurasia.



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