

India-Pakistan: After Peshawar, seize the peace opportunity

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India can make this a unique moment for South Asia too by reaching out to Pakistan with earnest proposals for cooperation—whether in fighting terrorism, aggressively promoting trade, or stabilising Afghanistan. This entails a sea-change in the official mindset—from regarding Pakistan as an enemy to be vanquished, to a potentially friendly neighbour, with whom contentious issues can be peacefully resolved. India must not squander this opportunity.

When Narendra Modi called Nawaz Sharif on December 16 to say that the Peshawar carnage “was not only an attack against Pakistan but an assault against all of humanity”, he raised the hope that he would empathetically engage Pakistan during its hour of crisis. That hope was soon weakened by the kneejerk official response to the granting of bail to Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, the alleged Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The bail was granted by a court. The Pakistan government has decided to appeal against it and detained Lakhvi. In India too, dozens of people charged with or convicted of serious offences have been granted bail, including Maya Kodnani, Amit Shah, LN Mishra’s killers, and so on.

Yet, our Parliament passed an anti-Lakhvi-bail resolution. Hours later, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval demanded that the post-Peshawar measures being taken against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) be extended to LeT; “Hafiz Saeed should be restrained from spewing anti-India venom openly”. The demand isn’t wrong in itself: Saeed insanely blamed India for the attack. But TTP, not LeT, self-confessedly carried it out; there’s no moral equivalence between the two at this moment. By focusing exclusively on LeT, India risks being seen as insensitive, narrow and parochial.

India also refused to grant visas to 24 Pakistani delegates invited to a December 19-21 seminar on “Understanding Pakistan”, planned by the Pakistan-India People’s Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD). PIPFPD is a worthy initiative launched 20 years ago during a particularly dark phase in India-Pakistan relations, and has held a number of citizen-to-citizen conventions in both countries. Scuttling a conference that can promote a better comprehension of Pakistani society and political processes sends out a wrong message.

Peshawar triggered unprecedented cross-border citizen-level solidarity, spontaneously expressed in numerous demonstrations and vigils in different Indian cities, and reciprocated generously from Pakistan. The attack has delivered a devastating shock not just to Pakistan’s civil society but to its “deep state” too, and created the ground for what could hopefully become a turning point in Pakistan’s policy towards terrorism. For the first time ever, Islamabad has publicly repudiated the spurious distinction between the “good Taliban” and the “bad Taliban”. After the attack, its Army chief visited Kabul, presumably in pursuance of the anti-TTP fight. This must be sustained and followed through with a resolute effort to decisively break the nexus between the Army, its secret agencies and Islamic extremists, used selectively against Indian targets, which has created the enormous *jehadi* apparatus that envelopes Pakistani society.

India can contribute substantially to this effort if it resumes the wantonly interrupted bilateral dialogue and addresses and cultivates Pakistan's pro-peace constituency. This constituency isn't negligible. Many sensible Pakistanis are protesting against the predominant "kill-'em-all" response to the Peshawar carnage, including the lifting of a moratorium on executions, followed by hangings, and anti-militant army operations. They are urging a critical look at the root-causes of the culture of extremism and violence that grips Pakistani society, and demand Pakistan's restructuring as a modern, tolerant, pluralist and democratic state.

The restructuring won't be easy. Yet, today is a unique moment for Pakistan, when issues long considered a taboo can be put on the agenda. India can make this a unique moment for South Asia too by reaching out to Pakistan with earnest proposals for cooperation—whether in fighting terrorism, aggressively promoting trade, or stabilising Afghanistan. This entails a sea-change in the official mindset—from regarding Pakistan as an enemy to be vanquished, to a potentially friendly neighbour, with whom contentious issues can be peacefully resolved. India must not squander this opportunity.

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*<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/12/27/After-Peshawar%3A-Seize-the-peace-opportunity>