

India/Pakistan - The Lahore stopover: Making sense of the 'known-unknown' in Narendra Modi's diplomatic coup

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If the US pressure brought it about, the curious reality is that only Left parties in India will back Modi's path of normalisation with Pakistan. What next?

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The controversy over the untimely, intemperate remarks by a top functionary of the Bharatiya Janta Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Ram Madhav, regarding "Akhand Bharat" only goes to show what an uphill task Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces if he chooses to carry forward his so-called historic coup last weekend to "drop by" at Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's home in Lahore.

The doctrine of "Akhand Bharat" and "Hindu Rashtra" expounded by the RSS is nothing new to the Pakistani ear. But the difference today is that India's prime minister is an erstwhile RSS pracharak, his government is mentored by the RSS, and most of his cabinet ministers are in one way or another affiliated with the RSS.

Profound disquiet

For anyone who follows Pakistan, it is at once obvious that there is profound disquiet in that country regarding Modi's government and the right-wing Hindu nationalist forces that mentor it.

The prevailing view in Pakistan is that Modi is an inveterate Pakistan-hater and a Hindutva fanatic and a normalisation of relations with India need not be expected on his watch.

In the Pakistani view, there is a real danger that if the going gets tough for the Modi government to acquit itself in good governance, it may not hesitate to ratchet up India-Pakistan tensions to distract public attention and even provoke an armed conflict.

This hardened crust of negative opinion in Pakistan regarding Modi will not easily give way as he is seen as someone who made a brilliant political career by riding the wings of Islamophobia.

Make no mistake, what we saw in Lahore on Friday is traditional Pakistani hospitality. Nothing more, nothing else. How it might transmute as trust leading to constructive engagement with the Modi government remains to be seen

Harsh reality

Equally, Modi himself is a prisoner of his Hindu nationalist camp, which dreams of undoing the Partition and indulges in wishful thinking about Pakistan as a nation disintegrating into tiny bits. Not only that, this camp views Pakistan's problems with a sense of Schadenfreude, gleefully brands it a "failed state", and consistently questions the very basis of engaging it in any form of dialogue.

In the perception of the Hindu nationalists, Modi's rise is a vindication of what they stood for, and, in turn, their expectations of him as prime minister are that he will realise their cherished dreams. Madhav faithfully rendered into words their passion regarding the subcontinent's contemporary history and politics.

Therefore, the best that Modi can hope for is to silence his own flock and reduce them to a sullen mood from where they are incapable of crossing his path. His strength lies in the extent of support he enjoys from the RSS. The manner in which Madhav's authentic views have been summarily disowned is very revealing.

Modi finds himself in a curious situation of having only the Left parties in India as his "natural allies" if he chooses to plough the path of normalisation with Pakistan. The Congress party will remain in a state of non-cooperation notwithstanding the fact that Modi is only picking up the threads of the United Progressive Alliance government's Pakistan policy.

The Congress cannot easily forget that the BJP as the then opposition in Parliament relentlessly discredited the dialogue process and doggedly frustrated Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's far-sighted vision to chart a new course in the India-Pakistan relationship.

How far Modi can carry forward his diplomatic coup under these trying circumstances, time only can tell.

The hard part

The hard part will begin in mid-January when the Foreign Secretaries meet. Pakistan will expect tangible results out of the dialogue and will not let India unilaterally garner the goodies of ceasefire on the border.

India will be expected to settle at least some of the "doable" issues in the relationship, which matter greatly to the Pakistani military. But then, what is it that Modi can deliver on Siachen or Sir Creek?

Indeed, both are eminently "doable". The draft agreement negotiated with Pakistan on Siachen dispute in end-1992 still languishes in the cupboard in South Block. Can Modi show the courage of leadership to overrule the military and dust it up?

The less said the better about the discussions on the Kashmir problem, which the UPA government took to an unprecedented level. But this government and its mentors root for "Akhand Bharat" and even lay claim to the Northern Areas of Pakistan.

Indeed, come to think of it, what is it that this government with such a maximalist agenda on the unfinished business of Partition can offer to Pakistan as the basis of an amicable Kashmir settlement?

The big question

All things considered, therefore, the big question is why Modi decided at all to initiate this “diplomatic coup”. The “known unknown” here lies in the sort of pressure that the United States of America brought to bear on Modi. For Washington, the lowering of India-Pakistan tensions is an imperative need today to advance its rebalance strategy in Asia.

Pakistan’s pivotal status geographically and its close alliance with China impact the USA’s rebalance strategy. But so long as India-Pakistan tensions remain high and Pakistan harbours threat perceptions of India, Washington cannot make any headway with Pakistan, leave alone shake up the China-Pakistan alliance.

The good thing for the Americans is that the Modi government is far more amenable to their pressure than any previous set-up in South Block – and conversely, in Pakistan too there is a military leadership that shares the civilian elites’ pro-western attitude.

The US President Barack Obama has lost no opportunity to impress upon Modi the urgent need to reduce India-Pakistan tensions. The US ascribes a central role to Pakistan in stabilising the Afghan situation and appreciates Pakistan’s stance that tensions with India distract the military from focusing on its western borders with Afghanistan.

No matter how Modi’s Lahore stopover came about – be it an extempore thought or a premeditated visit – it is hugely symbolic that he undertook the trip to Pakistan from Kabul.

This policy shift is to be entirely attributed to the US pressure, but it lacks support among the Indian foreign-policy and security establishment and has antagonised influential sections of the Indian strategic community who had blithely assumed that they enjoyed an ideological congruence on the foreign-policy front with the Sangh Parivar.

Paradoxically, the Modi government, which revels in nationalistic rhetoric, is proving to be highly vulnerable to American pressure. Why this is so – why such a sense of vulnerability to US pressure – is for the Sangh Parivar, which is deeply rooted in the Indian diaspora in North America, to explain. That also happens to be Ram Madhav’s dilemma today.

However, in the ultimate analysis, the Americans can take Modi this far to the stream all right, but can they make him – and his reluctant followers – drink from it? There are no easy answers here.

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P.S.

* “The Lahore stopover: Making sense of the ‘known-unknown’ in Narendra Modi’s diplomatic coup”. Scroll.in Dec 30, 2015 · 10:30 am:

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