



PHOTO-OPS AND WHIMSY

They will not make up for the lack of direction in Modi's Pakistan policy

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"IF YOU DON'T know where you are going, any road will get you there." Lewis Carroll did not write this with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistan policy in mind, but it aptly captures his episodic initiatives with our western neighbour. Columnist Aakar Patel has counted nine flip-flops in the 19 months of the Modi government. That is, if you ignore his bilious anti-Pakistan rhetoric during the election campaign to demonise then PM Manmohan Singh for seeking normalcy with Pakistan.

An attempt has been made to portray the Congress as opposed to peace with Pakistan. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the natural party of governance, the Congress has handled Pakistan with the deftness and sensitivity required — whether by military action in the 1965 war, the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, or the capture of Siachen in 1984. Also, diplomatically — take Tashkent 1966, Shimla 1972, or the nuclear confidence building measures agreement finalised by Rajiv Gandhi and implemented by P.V. Narasimha Rao.

But all those actions fitted into a larger strategy of securing India's national interest. Parliament was always taken into confidence, opposition leaders briefed, and the media kept informed. Now we have a government whose seniormost ministers are not aware of a visit by the PM to Pakistan. This is not a trivial issue. India-Pakistan relations concern the whole country and cannot be treated as the personal property

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What is Modi's Pakistan policy? Is it defined by "talks and terror can't go together", by "terrorists who wreaked havoc in Mumbai in 26/11 should be brought to justice first", or by "the two NSAs will talk only if they have to discuss terror"? Alternatively, is it one where he exchanges saris and shawls with the Pakistan PM, and now visits Pakistan to wish Nawaz Sharif for his birthday? It is hard for any party to support flip-flopping between extremes, with no change in the external environment or assurances from Pakistan.

We now have a peculiar situation: No one knows — and let's hope this excludes the PM — what changed in the last couple of months for Modi to execute this sharp U-turn. We still don't know what the national security advisors discussed in Bangkok, or how the comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan will begin. Is it being done under pressure of some foreign power that the PM wants to woo or is it due to a desire for personal glory? Is all this going to come at a cost India can ill afford? Can India's national interests be sacrificed at the altar of personal ambition?

The latest Lahore visit is nothing but another attempt to divert media attention from serious problems at home. Despite historic low crude oil prices, the economy has come to a grinding halt. As highlighted by this newspaper in a series, "Slowdown Signals" (*The Indian Express*, December 21-23) from power to roads to jobs, Modi has presided

over this crisis. Despite personally campaigning, he lost the electoral battle in Bihar. This was followed by the loss in local elections in Gujarat and important by-elections in MP. There have been serious charges of wrongdoing against two senior ministers, Sushma Swaraj and Arun Jaitley, and the chief ministers of Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh.

The PM is fond of the camera and likes to keep himself in the news. But India's Pakistan policy cannot be driven by optics sans concrete deliverables. Pakistan hasn't brought the perpetrators of 26/11 to justice. On the contrary, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, the terror mastermind, was released from a Pakistani jail — the government accepted this without protest. Nor has the government stopped cross-border infiltration. In fact, there has been a 25 per cent increase in ceasefire breaches this year. For all the saris and shawls that have been gifted by Modi, Pakistan has not even given India most favoured nation status so far.

Photo-ops and secrecy around interactions will not make up for the lack of direction in Modi's Pakistan policy. The contours of any dialogue with Pakistan have to be concrete, result-oriented and in India's national interest. Every Indian is a stakeholder in this process and needs to be taken into confidence. Compromises, especially on terror or Kashmir, will not be taken well by the people.

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