

MENDING WALL

Solidarity after the Peshawar killings caps a turbulent year in India-Pakistan relations

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ON 16 DECEMBER, the day of Pakistan's worst-ever terrorist attack, in which the Taliban massacred 132 schoolchildren, the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, called his Pakistani counterpart to offer his "deepest condolences" and "all assistance." He then took to Twitter to call on schools in India to observe two minutes of silence the following morning in tribute to those who never came home from the Army Public School in Peshawar the day before.

Pakistanis have long been accustomed to mourning their victims alone. In response to the Peshawar tragedy, though, they were joined in solidarity by the world, with the old enemy they have fought three wars against leading the chorus of sympathy. On Twitter, the hashtag #IndiaWithPakistan went viral.

For a moment, the two countries seemed to be functioning as reasonable neighbours. In the past, 16 December was often marked by a remembrance of old hostilities, with Indian nationalists gloating over their country's military victory in what was then East Pakistan in 1971, and Pakistani nationalists mourning the loss of that half of their country. Reactions to the attack also saw a sharp change in tone from

the mutual exhibition of passive aggression at the SAARC summit in November, when Modi and Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, tried to render each other invisible, until they were coaxed by the region's smaller countries to make nice in front of the cameras.

It has been a turbulent year for India-Pakistan relations. Seldom has the prospect of peace seemed more remote. Yet neither side desires war. Instead, the neighbours are locked in a volatile relationship where they veer between these two states. And the events of a terrible December, which made for an extraordinary moment of popular solidarity, do not change the basic terms of their discord. At different moments, each country has pushed the other to the brink of war or peace, but both have ultimately pulled back before either sets in as a new reality.

After Modi's election, there were modestly encouraging signs, with Sharif attending his swearing-in ceremony. The two right-wing leaders made a great show of their bonhomie, including a tender, somewhat Oedipal exchange of shawls and saris for each other's mothers. But as Sharif's power began to weaken in Pakistan after months of street protests led by the cricketer turned opposition leader Im-



At the SAARC summit, the warmth between Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif seen at the former's swearing-in seemed forgotten.

ran Khan, the cross-border goodwill, too, sharply dissipated. The number of Line-of-Control violations began to escalate around this time, and each side sternly threatened reprisals for the other's belligerence. South Asia pundits in Western capitals began to raise warnings, Cassandra-like, about an incipient nuclear war.

Pakistanis have never warmed to Modi. Among them, he will forever be associated with the 2002 Gujarat riots and his Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh background. Leading up to his election, there were great fears in Pakistan about what his ascendancy might portend. But there was also cause for cautious optimism in the weeks following his victory, when it seemed the Sharif and Modi governments might be able to carve out a new relationship.

There were other reasons to be slightly sanguine. Both prime ministers represent right-of-centre parties that cannot be easily outflanked by religio-nationalists in either country. After all, it was the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee who traveled to Pakistan in 1999 to sign the Lahore Declaration with Sharif. Modi and Sharif also both claim to see their economies as their top priorities, and can be pragmatic enough to let business concerns override ideological convictions. Temptations of shared wealth can sometimes smooth over borders.

Those prospects dimmed when foreign-secretary-level talks scheduled for August 2014 were cancelled. New Delhi had warned Islamabad not to meet with separatist Kashmiri leaders, but the Pakistani High Commissioner couldn't resist the provocation. That act of pettiness was

repaid in kind. India decided that it would resort to the silent treatment, which is an effective way of punishing people for having failed to value an earlier demonstration of intimacy.

As Sharif faced calls for his resignation, power began to drain away from him. At one point, an angry crowd stormed the headquarters of the state-owned Pakistan Television, terminating its broadcast. A shiver passed through the Pakistani capital. In the past, a blank screen usually hinted that a four-star general was powdering up to announce his own promotion, arguing that politics had become too important to be left to the politicians.

But no coup materialised. Military rule has become unfashionable in Pakistan, even as it has come into vogue in Egypt and Thailand. The generals have no interest in claiming responsibility for an ailing economy strapped to an International Monetary Fund assistance package, for a crushing energy crisis, or for an appalling law-and-order situation. Instead, they prefer to lurk behind the scenes, controlling the levers of power that matter most to them.

Since the summer protests, a chastened Sharif appears to have ceded control of foreign and defence policy to the head of the army, who shares his last name. In Pakistan, that means managing relations most crucially with Washington DC and New Delhi. General Raheel Sharif was feted in the US capital in November as he touted his troops' offensive against an array of militants in the most dangerous of all of Pakistan's seven tribal areas along the Afghan border, North Waziristan.

Raheel Sharif had more to show for his visit than the prime minister did after his sojourn to Washington DC in October 2013. On that occasion, Nawaz Sharif did little more than leave Barack Obama an open invitation to eat dal and keema with him in Lahore. Since the general returned home, military cooperation between the US and Pakistan has picked up for the first time since the raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

Before and since the Peshawar massacre, US drones targeted Pakistani Taliban militants hiding out in eastern Afghanistan. In early December, the United States handed over a key Pakistani Taliban militant, Latif Mehsud, to Pakistani authorities. And, for the first time, the Pakistanis said that they would target all militants, whether from the Pakistani Taliban or the Haqqani network, which they have long been suspected of covertly supporting.

The difference between the two Sharifs is that they have competing visions. The politician privileges the economy, the soldier champions security. One wants to share in India's economic success, the other fears that New Delhi's ambitions are also strategic, and could further encircle Pakistan—through India's superior relations, for example, with Kabul and Tehran. As long as military tensions endure, the soldier's word will be the one that wins out. Even so, the Peshawar attack might change things. Raheel Sharif is leading the war against the Taliban with a resolve that wasn't apparent during the tenures of his two predecessors, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and the pensioned dictator Pervez Musharraf. While focussing on his western border, Raheel Sharif will want a cool front along the Line of Control.

There are, however, other irritants to consider. In the days after the school massacre, Hafiz Saeed, the purported leader of the militant group Laskhar-e-Taiba, was much in evidence, both condemning the incident and accusing India of being behind it. That once-vaunted peacemaker, Musharraf, also took up the theme. He claimed that the Taliban had been backed by India and Afghanistan. This failed to explain, however, why during his tenure the government struck peace deals with the militants, and fostered warmer relations with New Delhi.

A perennial source of disappointment in Pakistan has been India's preference for dealing with the generals. Under the previous government, under President Asif Ali Zardari, it was a common refrain among Indian politicians and commentators that Pakistan's civilians were too weak to do anything. The effect of not talking to elected Pakistani governments has been to isolate them further in their pursuit of regional peace. For all their mutual loathing, hawks on both sides of the border are effective accomplices in thwarting such ambitions.

Even as the Pakistan-US situation stabilised over the last year, relations with India soured. The exchange of shelling in mid 2014 marked the worst violence between the two countries in a decade. It also became apparent that, unlike the Manmohan Singh government, Modi's administration is prepared to hit back at Pakistan with ferocity. While Modi favours trade with Pakistan, his government has made clear that this won't be at the cost of security.

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Pakistan has watched Modi's swift rehabilitation across the world with mounting anxiety. "At a time when India has become good at marketing its successes," a former Pakistani official told me, "Pakistan is still bad at dealing with its failures." The gap between the two countries has never been greater.

That isn't necessarily a bad situation to work from. To be able to pursue his economic ambitions, Modi needs stable relations with Pakistan. Pakistan also wants India to focus on its economy, and ultimately boost mutually profitable trade. It fears that if Modi fails to meet domestic expectations, he could, as it were, revert to type, and become a chest-beating Hindu nationalist constantly threatening war.

Whether or not that comes to pass, the gap in expectations between the two countries poses a challenge to the prospects for peace. There is a significant pro-peace lobby in Pakistan. It comprises the government, big business, and, on paper at least, almost all the mainstream political parties. Successive opinion polls have shown that while Pakistanis don't have a lofty opinion of their neighbours, they overwhelmingly favour better relations with them. Hafiz Saeed and his virulently anti-Indian militants represent a fringe, albeit a loud and dangerous one.

But there is little corresponding sentiment in India. Few want war with Pakistan, for obvious reasons, but just as many are happy not to talk either. "We should treat Pakistan with benign neglect," the right-wing commentator Swapan Dasgupta said at a debate on Pakistan in Delhi in late 2013. His sparring partner on that occasion, Mani Shankar Aiyar, a former deputy high commissioner to Karachi who is a keen advocate of peace and a big crowd-puller in Pakistan, speaks for a forlorn minority.

The day after the Peshawar attack, Nawaz Sharif sat side by side with other Pakistani political leaders, including his nemesis Imran Khan, at a press conference following an all-party meeting. Together, they resolved that Pakistan would no longer differentiate between the "good Taliban" and the "bad Taliban." The country was now at war with all militants.

These were powerful words. But it remains to be seen whether they acquire any substance in action. The sympathy from India swiftly diluted when Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, an alleged orchestrator of the 2008 attack on Mumbai, was released on bail two days after the school massacre. He was swiftly rearrested, with the government vowing to appeal his bail. It will not be easy to sustain Pakistan's freshly discovered resolve against the Taliban. It will be even harder for the country to maintain a united front against all the militant groups based on its soil. But if Pakistan does move in the direction it has promised, in the face of inevitable militant violence, then it certainly deserves the world's—and India's—sympathy. ■