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## Why New Delhi and Islamabad Need to Get Stakeholders on Board

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, at a meeting in Lahore on December 25, 2015. Photo: PTI

*Interest in Pakistan cuts across party affiliations in the Indian Punjab. It is much the same story on the other side though the Pakistani Punjab is often hamstrung by political and military considerations. The border States in India and Pakistan have business, cultural and familial ties that must be harnessed by both governments to push the peace process, says **Tridivesh Singh Maini**.*

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's *impromptu* stopover at Lahore on December 25, 2015, on his way back from Moscow and Kabul, caught the media not just in India and Pakistan, but also outside, by surprise. (Though the halt was ostensibly to wish Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on his birthday, the real import was hardly lost on Indo-Pak watchers) <sup>1</sup>.

Such stopovers are a done thing in other parts of the world, especially in Europe. Yet, if Modi's unscheduled halt was seen as dramatic and as a possible game changer, it was in no small measure due to the protracted acrimony between the neighbours, made worse by mutual hardening of stands post the Mumbai attack. In the event, the

European style hobnobbing seemed to find favour with both PMs and as much is suggested by this report in The Indian Express [2](#).

However, such spontaneity is not totally alien in the Indo-Pak context. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's invitation to his counterpart, Yousuf Raza Gilani, for the World Cup Semi-final 2011, which faced domestic criticism was one such gesture [3](#). In 1987, then President General Zia-Ul Haq visited India for a test match in Jaipur, at a time when tensions between both countries were on the rise due to Operation Brasstacks [4](#).

If one were to look at the run up to this Christmas Day stop over, something clearly was brewing between both countries. Consider the very brief, but cordial, meeting between both PMs on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Summit last month. The meeting between Sharif and Modi was followed almost immediately by a meeting between the National Security Advisers of India and Pakistan in Bangkok, and the visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, to Islamabad for the Heart of Asia Conference (December 7-8, 2015). Few would have imagined that the bilateral relationship between both countries would have witnessed such a transformation.

While comparisons have been made between Vajpayee's visit to Lahore in 1999 and Modi's in 2015, there are a few lessons, which the Modi Government can learn from the UPA.

Firstly, if one were to look at the phase between 2011 and 2013, the focus was on economic ties. In April 2011, the Commerce Secretaries met in Islamabad and both sides drew up a road map for engagement and identifying key areas with the thrust of course on Pakistan granting the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to India, and India removing the non-tariff barriers to Pakistani products. Both sides also sought to address visa issues [5](#).

Substantial progress was made during this period, such as the inauguration of the Integrated Check Post at Attari in April 2012, and Pakistan's decision to move away from a Positive List to a Negative List [6](#).

In terms of bilateral trade, too there was a significant rise during these years. Nonetheless the MFN status to India remains elusive to this day [7](#). In addition to this, both sides have not been able to implement the provisions of the visa agreement signed in September 2012.

Secondly, while some hawks in the strategic community have often mocked at the role of Punjab in the India-Pakistan relationship - either hyphenating it with pre-Partition nostalgia, or dismissing it as *pappi-jhappi / assitussí* diplomacy - they conveniently forget that the interests of East Punjab in engaging with West Punjab are not dictated entirely by nostalgia. Today, the business community in Ludhiana and Amritsar is keen to benefit from a stronger relationship across the Radcliffe, since Punjab, which is a landlocked state, does not have many other options. Realising this, the UPA Government had encouraged exchanges between Indian Punjab and Pakistan Punjab, leading to better connectivity between the neighbouring provinces.

There is bi-partisan consensus on ties with Pakistan in the Indian Punjab. Former Chief Minister and Congress Member of Parliament from Amritsar, Capt. Amarinder Singh, and the incumbent Chief Minister and the Akali Dal leader, Parkash Singh Badal, have both been in favour of stronger engagement between both the Punjabs. During the NITI Aayog meeting last year, one of the demands put forward by Badal was opening up of the Hussainiwala-Kasur border [8](#).

During their visits to Pakistan both Captain Singh and the senior Badal's son and Deputy Chief Minister, Sukhbir Singh Badal, stressed on cultural exchanges and religious tourism. However, the stronger emphasis was perhaps

on economic ties between the two Punjabs. During Sukhbir Singh Badal's visit to Pakistan, the possibility of exporting electricity from Indian Punjab to Pakistan Punjab was also discussed <sup>9</sup>. So much so, the Akali Dal, despite being a political opponent of the State Congress, backed the initiatives of the UPA Government vis-à-vis Pakistan <sup>10</sup>.

The common provincial interest holds even today. Though the Congress at the centre has criticised Modi for his stopover in Lahore, Capt. Amarinder Singh has been quoted as saying, "I am all for peace and have always maintained peace". Singh also referred to his own initiatives, "When I was CM, Indo-Pak games were held. 4,500 visas were issued for a cricket match here," he said <sup>11</sup>.

The father-son, Badal duo have of course also welcomed the visit of PM Modi <sup>12</sup>, <sup>13</sup>.

The governments on the other side of the Radcliffe have been unable to echo this sentiment totally, not only because the Pakistani Punjab is larger but also because the province dominates the politics and military of Pakistan. For long, Punjab was the citadel of raging anti-India sentiment, which was visible both during the aftermath of the partition, and the 1971 war (Shah, M 1997: 143). A change has been evident since the late 1990's and during Nawaz Sharif's second term. The reasons for this are many, but the economic rationale, and continued engagement over the past decade and a half have considerably helped in reducing the acrimony on both sides. Sharif, a businessman himself, has been consistently in favour of greater bilateral trade.

The re-election of Nawaz Sharif rekindled hopes of a détente between both countries, notwithstanding anxieties at the national level due to tensions on the Line of Control. Significantly, the bonhomie between the two Punjabs remained intact. Pakistani Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif during his India visit in December 2013 Spoke about a closer relationship between both Punjabs, and visited his ancestral village Jatti Umra <sup>14</sup>, <sup>15</sup>, <sup>16</sup>. Shahbaz Sharif is amongst the few individuals who interacted with Modi on his stopover and is scheduled to visit India in February.

In addition to the State governments, it would be important to give due credit to the Chambers of Commerce from the two Punjabs. The PHD Chamber of Commerce and the Lahore Chamber have both played a positive role in linking business communities on both sides of the Radcliffe. For instance, during the tension-filled year of 2014, businessmen from both sides spoke in favour of granting authority to the Chambers for recommending visas and also setting up a business park at Wagah-Attari where businessmen from both sides could interact without visas <sup>17</sup>. More recently at the Punjab International Trade Expo, 2015, held in Amritsar, a large number of businessmen from Pakistan visited the fair. A common refrain heard during the fair related to the relevance of trade with India and the increasing threat from China.

The Indian Punjab in general, and the Wagah-Attari border in particular, are important in the India-Pakistan context. While New Delhi obviously cannot allow Punjab to dictate the relationship, it is important to have it as a stakeholder because of the State's strong interest in issues such as trade between both sides, visa regulations and connectivity. Even beyond the bilaterals, projects like Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) would terminate in the Indian Punjab <sup>18</sup>. The business community in India is also looking for access to the other side through the Wagah-Attari border. It would also be pertinent to point out, that China has evinced interest in extending the CPEC (China-Pakistan economic corridor), till the Indian side of the border on more than one occasion,. While this is wishful thinking as of today, no one can predict future outcomes <sup>19</sup>.

Even in the context of religious tourism, the role of the State governments is important. Religious pilgrimages by Sikhs to religious shrines in Pakistan have sustained during times of tension and the provincial governments in both Punjab have played a significant role in facilitating this. A number of important Hindu religious sites such as Kataraj, are also in Punjab.

Apart from Punjab, it is also important for other border States such as Rajasthan and Gujarat to be part of this process. Despite talk of opening the Munabao-Khokhrapar land crossing for trade, there has been no success so far. The Sufi shrine of Ajmer Sharif, which is in Rajasthan, receives a large number of pilgrims from all over Pakistan. The Rajasthan government should urge the Union government to ease the visa procedure for Pakistani pilgrims, and similarly solve visa issues for separated families in Rajasthan wanting to visit the Sindh.

In conclusion, while New Delhi and Islamabad need to lead the way, the capitals of border States, especially Lahore and Chandigarh, need to be key stakeholders in this process. Other States too have important contributions to make in this context, including Rajasthan-Sindh and Gujarat-Sindh. An annual dialogue between the Chief Ministers of border States on economic and people-to-people issues will deepen the relationship. The inclusion of the Chief Ministers of border States in high level bilateral negotiations is equally important for advancing better relations between India and Pakistan.

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