India’s Pakistan Policy Post-Nawaz Sharif Win

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On May 12, 2013 as Pakistan General Election results were pin-pointing twice Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s historic win, in a TV appearance on TIMESNOW I was asked what points I had to offer for India’s Pakistan policy Post-Nawaz Sharif win.

Putting it briefly, and removed from the media euphoria, the following points were made by me during the TV discussion:

- Nawaz Sharif’s win was a historic win both for Pakistan’s democracy and it augured well for India reputed as he was for building good relations with India. However, I cautioned that there should not be an over-hype both within policy circles and on TV channels. India must keep its expectations level low.
- Indian media normally gives political leaders a hundred day honeymoon on assumption of power, In case of Nawaz Sharif we need to give at least one hundred and fifty days so that his third term policy priorities and constraints can unfold and pan out to enable correct Indian policy perspective assessments to be made.
- Three other major developments await Nawaz Sharif’s within months of his emerging as Prime Minister of Pakistan, namely the end of President Zardari’s tenure as President of Pakistan (9 September 2013), the end of extended three year tenure of Pakistan Army Chief, General Kayani (27 November 2013) and the retirement of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry (11 December 2013) may limit PM Nawaz Sharif’s political manoeuvre space till new successors are installed. That will be Nawaz Sharif’s biggest challenge in his first seven months in office besides the law and order and economic decline.
- India should not expect any game-changers from Nawaz Sharif till early next year.
- Pakistan’s India policy under Nawaz Sharif would also be heavily dependent on China’s and United States attitudinal inclinations towards Nawaz Sharif. It would also be dependent on current priorities of United States and China determining relations with India.
Pakistan stands at historic cross-roads in terms of its political dynamics of having been able to ensure a back-to back return of civilian governments through fairly fair and free elections. People of Pakistan need to be complimented for their courage to withstand violent threats by extremists and come out to vote in historically large numbers. Pakistanis have been struggling for democracy since 2007 when lawyers, students, civil rights groups and women groups turned out in large numbers on Pakistani streets against its military ruler General Musharraf. The million-man march spearheaded by Nawaz Sharif for restoration to office of Chief Justice Chaudhary was a game changer in terms of unquestioned military hold over Pakistan’s governance.

In the past I have written about “Pakistan Democracy: India’s Strategic Imperative” and that India needs to do more than it was doing at all levels. India’s Pakistan policy now more than ever before needs to be geared towards this end when policy formulations are re-casted. The helpless shrug that India has to do business with whosoever is in power is no longer valid. India must be assertive in shaping its security environment.

**India’s expectation levels need to be kept low.** Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif does not have a magic wand to create a new Pakistan and new India-friendly Pakistan Army, one suiting India’s expectations. Even though he will be an unprecedented third-term Prime Minister with a massive political majority at his command, he to begin with will still have to operate within the constraints of the existing hold of the Pakistan Army on Pakistan’s external affairs and internal dynamics.

Even before Nawaz Sharif has assumed office, the Pakistan Army Chief General Kayani called on the Prime Minister-designate in Lahore and advised him to go slow on changes in Pakistan policies towards India and Afghanistan. In other words, telling the PM-designate that he should not trample on Pakistan Army’s “Core Interest” in foreign policy formulation as regards India.

So Indian expectations aired on Indian TV as to whether Nawaz Sharif would bring Pakistanis accused in Mumbai 26/11 to justice, or extradite the rabid anti-India baiter Hafiz Seed to India of being the master-mind to India, are premature and ill-timed. The same would apply to expecting Pakistan to curtail ISI terrorism and disruptive activities in India. Why are we forgetting that the Pakistan Army controls, strategizes and directs all ISI terrorism operations against India, **Maintaining adversarial and confrontational postures towards India is a “Core Interest of the Pakistan Army”** and it brooks no interference in this field by the civilian government. **“Terrorism is a policy instrument of the Pakistan Army”**.

In Nawaz Sharif’s previous two Prime Ministerial tenures he was eased out of office by the Pakistan Army when he made moves against the “Core Interests” of the Pakistan Army. He is the only Pakistani Prime Minister to have eased out/side-lined four Pak Army Chiefs from office. However, this time around he can be expected to be more patient and wiser in dealing with the Pakistan Army Generals.

India should therefore not be in a hurry to expect miracles from Nawaz Sharif to deliver on India’s expectations. He needs to be given time to
consolidate his political gains. India on its own counts needs to add teeth to its counter-terrorism strategies against Pakistan-originated terrorism and border provocations and stop politicising strong counter-terrorism initiatives.

This time around Nawaz Sharif has a major political advantage in that in the preceding two to three years Pakistan Army’s own domestic image in Pakistani public perceptions has gone down considerably because of its ineffectiveness in controlling domestic terrorism, military operations in the Western Frontier regions and the liquidation by US Special Forces of Osama bin Laden within the major Pakistan Army garrison town of Abbottabad. In Pakistani public perceptions the Pakistan Army is increasingly be viewed as the collusive handmaiden of the United States and General Kayani as the poster-boy of America.

That the above concerns troubles the Pakistan military hierarchy is evident from the recent assertions by General Kayani at Army gatherings that retribution would not end the game of hide and seek of democracy versus dictatorship in Pakistan. This was the other major point of discussion between General Kayani’s three and a half hour call on Prime Minister Sharif in the last two days, besides Pakistan’s India policy.

Pakistan Army feels that with Nawaz Sharif third time tenure as Prime Minister and that too his return to the Office for the first time as Prime Minister after his Kargil War related ouster by the Pakistan Army, there may be political moves for Enquiry Commission on the Kargil War and the role of the Pak Army.

I will not be surprised that the United States prevails on Nawaz Sharif to give General Kayani another extension to facilitate US exit from Afghanistan. Better still, as I had referred in one of my earlier Papers that General Kayani was positioning himself for a political role ahead and we may find that with US pressure, the Pakistan polity may be goaded into facilitating emergence of General Kayani as the next civilian President of Pakistan. Unless Nawaz Sharif himself opts to be President of Pakistan and his brother Shahbaz Sharif is made the Prime Minister.

The other crucial factor would be that in the Post-Chief Justice Chaudhry phase whether the Pakistan judiciary continues with its existing role of judicial activism and ensues that democracy is allowed to bloom in Pakistan. And that it does not end up as a collaborator with the Pakistan Army as in the past. Justice Chaudhry has set exemplary standards in the independence of the Judiciary and his successor would find it difficult to go astray from that path.

It also needs to be recorded that the Chief Justice of Pakistan’s rulings stand valid till the last hour of his office and that in the testing times of the next seven months ahead all power canters within Pakistan would be subjected to intense judicial scrutiny by the incumbent Chief Justice.

Having spoken so much about Pakistan in Post Nawaz Sharif victory in the General Elections, views must also be aired on what Pakistan’s new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif needs to be told about India’s strategic sensitivities. India needs to tell Pakistan firmly that Pakistan Army’s
“Core Interests” clash with India’s prime security concerns and while he may not be able to tame the Pakistan Army instantly, he could with his massive political backing and bipartisan political support restrain Pakistan Army’s military adventurism impulses towards India, especially terrorism and border clashes.

Both Pakistan and India would be well advised to dispense with the fruitless Peace Dialogues and instead establish Indo-Pak Economic Dialogue mechanisms whereby Pakistan’s economic collapse is averted and where India can help Pakistan more by plugging it into India’s economic resurgence. This needs to be encouraged at business-to-business levels and not at governmental official levels.

The above would ensure that Nawaz Sharif can redeem his election promises to the Pakistani public in terms of bringing Pakistan economy to good health. If so done, other Asia countries like Japan, South Korea and Singapore would be more inclined to assist in Pakistan’s economic recovery.

_Pakistan’s top political priority is economic recovery and not strategic recovery of Pakistan Army to emerge as India’s strategic co-equal._ The latter is not attainable and that Pakistan Army quest has over the years has contributed to Pakistan’s present economic collapse.

The Indian Prime Minister need not be in a hurry to visit Pakistan as it could inject wrong messages into Pakistani political dynamics affecting the political stature and political honour that he has now once again redeemed. PM Nawaz Sharif despite his initial emotional gush on India may himself postpone his India visit till after India’s General Elections in mid- 2014, if not earlier.

However India’s Pakistan policy need not be anchored to personal predilections of people in power but anchored to India’s long term strategic interests. To that end, India would be well served if it can assist Nawaz Sharif in economic resuscitation of Pakistan in the interim, avoiding traditional minefields that have dominated Indo-Pak Dialogues of the last ten years.

The factors highlighted above need to be factored-in by India’s political dispensations both existing and new, to craft India’s Pakistan policy so that while India’s national security interests are safe-guarded, the political dynamics of Pakistan are kept in mind for achieving durable peace by accurate readings and assessment of Pakistan’s dynamics.

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