

TERRORISM IS A GENUINE BARRIER TO INDIA-PAKISTAN DIALOGUE

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After the historic victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Lok Sabha elections, he received congratulatory phone calls from almost all important global leaders. One of them came from Imran Khan, prime minister of Pakistan. According to the government's press release, Mr Modi reminded his Pakistani counterpart of his initial suggestion for the two countries to jointly fight poverty. He also emphasised that "creating trust and an environment free of violence and terrorism were essential for fostering cooperation for peace, progress and prosperity in our region".

With every national election or a change in government in either of the two countries, there is always a renewed hope for peace. In Pakistan, even the appointment of a new army chief inevitably brings the same sentiments to the forefront. Arun Shourie, a former politician and veteran journalist, has often said that every new Indian prime minister overestimates his abilities to achieve the following two tasks: one, improving relations with Pakistan; and two, reviving India's beleaguered public sector enterprises. Though made in jest, this comment carries a kernel of truth. Mr Modi, too, wasn't immune to it during his first term in office.

In an effort to establish peace, he even made an impromptu visit to Pakistan in 2015 on the birthday of Nawaz Sharif, Mr Khan's predecessor. However, a week later, Pakistani terrorists launched a dastardly attack on Indian Air Force station in Pathankot and the entire peace initiative was left in tatters. Jolted by that experience, Mr Modi was justified in asking for a halt to terrorism before peace talks could be given a serious consideration. There is no harm in reopening talks with Pakistan despite the fact that they have achieved little in the past. But the biggest problem is Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. With the Pulwama terrorist attack fresh in mind, Mr Modi will find it difficult to move too far ahead in resuming the dialogue process. However, a brief pull aside meeting at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in June cannot be ruled out. Mr Khan's and the Pakistani army's sincerity towards peace is under scrutiny.

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