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AS India navigates a critical phase in its ideological journey under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, its ambitious Hindutva-driven agenda raises questions about its future direction and impact on regional geopolitics. For Pakistan, tensions with India have simmered for decades, and pose a pivotal question regarding how to engage with its eastern neighbour.

Modi is riding a wave of popularity, thanks mainly to an effective foreign policy and impressive economic growth and development. However, much of this success is also owed to favourable geopolitics since the dawn of this century. After 9/11, India projected itself to the West as a fellow victim of terrorism. The bonhomie with the West found reinforcement when the US decided to pivot its focus towards Asia, choosing India as the preferred partner in its strategic competition with China. Thus, India started receiving substantial US investments to bolster its military and economic prowess. Meanwhile, the Indian economy has registered high growth rates since 1991, positioning the country to become the world’s fifth largest economy.

Hence, in the second Modi term, an emboldened regime aggressively pursued a twin-goal agenda: the internal creation of a Hindu state, and the external assertion of its presence. But this ambitious plan is not cost-free. The goal of creating a Hindu nationalist state is driving India farther away from its secular and pluralistic moorings. Accordingly, the space for minorities is shrinking fast. With a sizable Muslim population of 14.5 per cent, and over 20pc of the population belonging to Scheduled Caste communities — including the Dalits who are grossly discriminated against — tomorrow’s India might be headed for potentially massive internal commotion. Adding to its domestic pressures are the concerns of five southern states, which feel that their share of revenue is being appropriated by northern India. The farmers have also been restive for years.

Externally, India, despite being a strategic US partner, maintains substantive ties with Russia and economic engagement with China, citing its policy of strategic autonomy. It is also making a gradual shift from continental to maritime space, building up its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and aspiring to become a ‘net security provider’ in the region.

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As for Pakistan, India has cut off all links with it for the past eight years. Since independence, it has been an electoral issue in India. The leading political parties, particularly the BJP, demonise Pakistan to lure the votes of the Hindu majority. The underlying argument has always been that the creation of Pakistan was tantamount to the vivisection of Bharat Mata (Mother India) and must be undone to recreate Akhand Bharat (united India).

This time, the mantra is that Pakistan must stop alleged cross-border terrorism. But, the reality is that today’s India is not under any terrorist threat that could be attributed to Pakistan. In fact, it is Pakistan which is under threat of cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan and India. Recent discoveries indicate that Indian intelligence has been systematically targeting opponents in Pakistan (as it has in Canada and the US). In January, Pakistan announced that Indian state operatives had sponsored the killing of two Pakistanis in Sialkot and Rawalakot in 2023, for which full evidence was available, and that there were 20 such cases under investigation. A recent story in The Guardian confirmed Pakistan’s claim.

Apropos illegally occupied Jammu & Kashmir, the Modi government has displayed a heavy-han­d­­ed approach. In Aug­ust 2019, India de­­­­­ci­­­­ded to abrogate the statehood of Kashmir and initiated demogra­phic engineering to enable non-Kashmiri subje­cts to settle there. While Pakistan has consistently defended Kash­miris’ right to self-determination, the international community has not exercised any pressure on India, as pragmatism trumps principles. Most countries want to engage with India for economic cooperation and tend to overlook its excesses in occupied Kashmir.

Under the circumstances, suggestions have been made, including by this writer, that while maintaining our formal position, Pakistan should merge Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir as provisional provinces, subject to a final settlement of the Kashmir dispute. As it is, the people of GB have long sought full merger with Pakistan.

Of late, there has been discussion on reopening direct trade with India to benefit consumers and traders of both countries. Since it takes two to tango, the government here is advised not to announce any initiative unless it receives clear signals of reciprocity from India. Until the ongoing Indian polls are over, and a new government is formed, ‘wait and see’ is the only option available to Pakistan.

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