[Engineer Khurram Dastgir-khan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/engineer-khurram-dastgir-khan)

March 30, 2021

**Reckoning with India**

It is not unusual for retired civil servants to reflect on the past. In a recent interview to an Indian journalist, however, former diplomat Abdul Basit Khan has twisted facts, engaged in innuendo, and unleashed his prejudices in assessing the policy of the country’s leadership, particularly in dealing with India.

Retired Ambassador Khan’s denunciation of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is false and offensive, especially his allegation that in search for a peaceful and honourable resolution of our differences with India, Sharif was “pandering” in his interaction with the Indian leaders. The accusations against former advisor on foreign affairs Sartaj Aziz and former special assistant to PM Syed Tariq Fatemi – that they were “apologetic” to India – are also incorrect and unfounded.

The former ambassador has disregarded that every single government in Pakistan, whether elected or military, has pursued the goal of achieving peaceful understanding with its eastern neighbor. This has been true of Pakistan’s successive governments as far back as that of Liaquat Ali Khan down to the current hybrid dispensation. Even Gen (r) Pervez Musharraf, who launched the unauthorized Kargil military operation, became an advocate of dialogue with India after he had seized political power.

Nawaz Sharif believes in peace and has struggled for a peaceful, equitable, and honourable settlement of all issues – including the issue of Kashmir – that have bedeviled relations between Pakistan and India. This has been his publicly-articulated policy ever since he entered politics. To characterize PM Sharif’s calm but serious negotiating style as “pandering” to any foreign leader is false, unfounded and malicious.

The record is self-evident and long-established. Was Sharif pandering to India when he declared Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent and, in response to five tests by India, conducted six nuclear tests on May 28, 1998?

During his three terms in office, Sharif endeavored to engage in a sustained and result-oriented dialogue process with India. Under his guidance, Pakistan and India agreed on the mechanism known as the Composite Dialogue Process, which focused simultaneously on eight subjects: Siachen, Sir Creek, the Tulbul navigation project, terrorism and drug trafficking, economic and commercial cooperation, promotion of friendly exchanges, peace and security including CBMs, and Jammu and Kashmir. It was the first time India had ever agreed to formally discuss “all outstanding issues including Jammu and Kashmir”.

After Sharif declared Pakistan as a nuclear power in 1998, the then Indian PM A B Vajpayee undertook in February 1999 the first ever official visit by any Indian prime minister to Pakistan. The resultant Lahore Declaration contained the road map for resolution of issues between the two countries, including the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. This promising initiative was sabotaged unfortunately a few weeks later by the unsanctioned Kargil misadventure.

Upon assuming office for the third time in June 2013, Sharif picked up the thread from where the India-Pakistan dialogue had unravelled. He communicated plainly with the Indian leadership, first with former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh and later with PM Narendra Modi upon the latter’s election in May 2014. As PM, Nawaz Sharif's visit to New Delhi to witness the oath-taking of PM Modi was undertaken with the objective of promoting peace and security in the region.

In the meeting between the two prime ministers, it was emphasized that with both leaders having received strong electoral mandates, they needed to engage in a sustained dialogue process. Sharif not only recalled the Lahore Declaration, but called upon the Indian prime minister to join hands with him to intensify their efforts to resolve all bilateral issues, including the issue of Jammu and Kashmir.

In Sartaj Aziz’s engagements with his respective Indian counterparts; former Indian external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj, and in his capacity as National Security Advisor with Ajit Doval, he made it clear that the issue of Jammu and Kashmir was at the root of Pakistan-India tensions and conflicts over the past seven decades. Aziz also made it clear that in any resolution of the Kashmir issue, the will of the people of Kashmir would be imperative.

Under Sharif's directions, the Foreign Office ensured that relations with India and the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir figured in all our meetings with foreign leaders and in our statements at multilateral forums, including at the UN, the Commonwealth and the OIC. In this pursuit, Pakistan made a major diplomatic gain in the Joint US-Pakistan statement issued at the conclusion of former prime minister Sharif's visit to Washington in October 2015.

The Sharif-Obama joint statement contained an important reference to a "sustained and resilient dialogue process between the two South Asian neighbors, aimed at resolving all outstanding territorial and other disputes, including Kashmir, through peaceful means." This reference to Kashmir in a Pak-US joint statement was unprecedented and remains a milestone six years later.

Nawaz Sharif led the diplomatic initiative to bring Kashmir in sharp focus at multilateral forums, which resulted in a comprehensive and strident espousal of Kashmir in the Istanbul Summit Declaration of the Organization of Islamic Conference in 2016.

Sharif’s trenchant advocacy of Kashmir at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016 heralded the UN Human Rights High Commissioner’s landmark and hitherto unparalleled 2018 ‘Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir’.

Under Sharif’s direction, the Foreign Office arranged for our serving ambassadors, as well as retired diplomats, including former foreign secretaries, to be invited regularly for consultations and to benefit from their insight.

While posted in New Delhi as high commissioner for three and a half years, Ambassador Khan was often called to Islamabad to share his observations and assessments with the Foreign Office. Whether in person or through his dispatches from New Delhi, he did not express his discontent with the government’s India policy.

It is unethical for a diplomat to question publicly the instructions given to him by the elected government of the day. Nor should he ever inject his personal views on any aspect of government policy. If, however, a civil servant is unhappy or disagrees with the policy directives of the country's leadership that holds the mandate of the people, he has the option to submit his resignation.

Ambassador Khan remained en poste and did not choose resignation. He has instead chosen to vent out his anger and frustration post-retirement with his service seniors as well as political leaders in an interview given to sensationalize the forthcoming publication of his book.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly.

Email: pmlnna81@gmail.com

Twitter: @kdastgirkhan