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CORRIDOR OF COMFORT

On Kartarpur, change in Pakistan army's thinking is guiding the PM

ONE HUNDRED and twenty km from Lahore and only 4 km from the Indian border, Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur was where the founder of Sikhism Baba Guru Nanak spent his last 18 years and gathered his spiritual flock around an astoundingly humanist creed. That was in 1539.

In 2018, Pakistani army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa broke it to ex-cricketer and Congress politician Navjot Singh Sidhu that Pakistan would be interested in allowing Sikhs to visit Sikhism's most sacred shrine by building a "corridor" to it from the Indian border. Sidhu was understandably overjoyed and hugged the chief for which he was hauled over the coals by the media in India: He got too chummy with someone engaged in fomenting terrorism in India.

After that, Prime Minister Imran Khan stepped in and announced the inauguration of the Kartarpur corridor on November 28. He said his party and all the opposition plus the army were "on the same page" about the corridor. He was lucky because last time another Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif got pally with India's statesman-premier Atal Bihari Vajpayee he was "not on the same page" and was rewarded with the ignominy of the Kargil Operation. And when Prime Minister Narendra Modi privately visited Sharif, Imran Khan joined the slogan: "Modi ka jo yar hai, ghaddar hai".

But the change in the thinking of the

army has brought about a spiritual change in Khan. He is of course a spiritual man, saying his five prayers and visiting the mausoleums of the great saints. Last time he visited the tomb of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, he was transformed and married a woman from among the custodians of the shrine. We must remember that Baba Farid is a Punjabi classic that the Muslims couldn't have known had Baba Guru Nanak not decided to preserve his inspiring verse in the Granth Sahib.

Imran Khan in childhood always attended the *mela* of Mianmir with his friends from Zaman Park. When his greatly revered mother died, she was laid to rest in the proximity of the grave of Mianmir Sahib he probably didn't realise that Mianmir had laid the foundation of the Sikh shrine Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple), at the request of Guru Arjan Dev.

Khan will probably have to wait till after the re-election of Modi to see what effect the Kartarpur corridor will have on Indo-Pak relations. Another corridor called CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) has not brought the two wrangling neighbours together. The Chinese in their infinite intellectual flexibility have asked Pakistan to include India in CPEC, but despite great admiration for China, Pakistan's lack of "lateral thinking" has prevented a proper understanding of Beijing's approach to the region. Likewise,

Afghanistan and India have asked Pakistan for another corridor: A two-way trade route through its territory, but Islamabad's strategic aristocracy is unable to comprehend how beneficial such a corridor could be.

Prime Minister Modi, Chanakya-like, is playing a far more nuanced game — reaching out to Iran-Afghanistan on the one hand and Saudi Arabia-UAE on the other as an "outer circle" gambit against Pakistan. He is trading with enemy China while joining the America's "encirclement" strategy against China in South and Southeast Asia. Can Khan learn from Modi's *modus operandi*?

What India and Pakistan need is "normalisation" before they can address "disputes". The mantra in Pakistan is: We are giving you the Kartarpur corridor and ask only for one thing in return — talks on Kashmir. India, knowing that talks mean a long deadlocking diplomacy over Kashmir, says stop doing terrorism first. The question is: Who wants peace more? Clearly Pakistan does, and it needs to emphasise normalisation and trade if it doesn't want another deadlock. It would be a mistake to not know that Delhi knows this. But the fact is that Pakistan stands to gain from normal relations after sorting out India's funny attitude about tariff and non-tariff barriers.

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