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## Optimism for a new start on India-Pakistan

December 26, 2015

The sudden warming of relations between India and Pakistan seems to have taken many by surprise. What began with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi wishing his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, a happy birthday ended with Mr Modi stopping in Lahore on his way back from addressing the Afghan parliament in Kabul. Such was the impromptu nature of the visit, Pakistan's national security adviser was unable to travel from Islamabad in time.

Although the importance of personal relations between prime ministers in international relations can sometimes be overstated, the context of the occasionally stuttering relations between the two nuclear-armed countries means this development deserves to be welcomed.

It has been 12 years since an Indian prime minister last visited Pakistan and after an initial attempt at rapprochement when Mr Modi invited Mr Sharif to attend his inauguration in May last year, relations deteriorated and Mr Modi called off planned peace talks. The two sides traded fire over the disputed border of Kashmir, killing dozens and as recently as last week, India's departing high commissioner in Islamabad described relations as being at "a tipping point".

While this return to engagement is good for the citizens of India and Pakistan, it is also a positive development from the perspective of the Gulf countries. An end to the scrapping between Islamabad and New Delhi is likely to improve the security vacuum that has existed in western

Pakistan and which has been exploited by extremist groups – first by Al Qaeda and more recently by ISIL.

As the experience in Syria and Iraq has shown, extremism not only thrives in such vacuums, it also expands from them and can wreak terror in distant capitals. If a warmer relationship between India and Pakistan can ensue from this impromptu visit by Mr Modi, the space for ISIL to establish itself in the region will be reduced and we will all be safer.

While the optics of seeing Mr Modi and Mr Sharif hand in hand and hugging augur well, it will be the bilateral talks scheduled for next month that will show whether this has substance or whether this ends up being no more than a gesture. But given that Mr Modi's address to the Afghan parliament included urging closer cooperation between India, Pakistan and others, there are grounds for rare levels of optimism.