

NOREF Expert Analysis

The long and rocky road to India-Pakistan rapprochement

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Executive summary

The India-Pakistan peace process, has gained momentum since minister-level talks were restarted in early 2011. Recent months have brought considerable progress in improving bilateral ties. This includes a new visa accord, an energy agreement, and Pakistan's decision to grant most-favoured nation status to India.

However, the relationship remains hampered by territorial disputes; the Kashmir problem is nowhere close to being resolved. Bilateral ties are also undermined by hostile public opinion. Recent polling finds significant majorities in each country harbouring unfavourable views of the other, hardline narratives remain entrenched and criticism of each country's policies continues to prevail. Nonetheless, there is cause for hope. Pakistan's foreign policy is shifting,

with a greater emphasis on regional reconciliation. And over the last year both countries have responded with restraint during periods of crisis.

At the same time, the volatile geopolitics of South Asia mean that full-fledged normalisation is not guaranteed and could produce violent backlashes. A chief concern is that anti-India militants long supported by the Pakistani security establishment could turn against their former patron and declare war against Islamabad.

Europe can help promote India-Pakistan peace by offering to mediate negotiations and by sponsoring projects in both countries that reduce the potential for extremist ideas and actions. Ultimately, however, outsiders will need to be both cautious and patient.

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On September 8th 2012 India and Pakistan concluded a landmark visa agreement. The accord eases restrictions on cross-border travel and has been hailed as the latest sign of a thaw in relations between the two countries. This progress, witnessed over a period of nearly two years, is encouraging. While the accord masks the immense obstacles that still stand in the way of full-fledged normalisation, rising levels of bilateral co-operation are making these obstacles look increasingly more surmountable.

Grounds for optimism

There are ample grounds for optimism. Since Islamabad and New Delhi resumed ministerial-level peace talks in early 2011, sustained diplomacy has yielded substantive results. In recent months New Delhi agreed to export electricity to energy-starved Pakistan, Islamabad allowed Indian officials to visit Pakistan to investigate the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks and Pakistan granted most-favoured nation status to India.

Pakistani public statements about reconciliation radiate confidence. “We will not be held hostage to history”, declared Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar after the inking of the visa accord. This is because, perhaps for the first time in Pakistan’s history, there is an emerging political consensus favouring better relations with India – including among the chief opposition parties and the powerful military.

However, this unity does not prevail in India, where the major political opposition party is often critical of reconciliation. This may explain why Indian public statements about the peace process are more measured than Pakistani ones. While Khar described the visa signing as “the first step in normalisation”, her Indian counterpart, S. M. Krishna, was more cautious, noting that the two sides remain a long way away from resolving core disputes.

Obstacles to reconciliation

Little has been done to address the territorial tensions that have triggered three wars between the two countries and justified heavy border

deployments. Many thought this year’s avalanche on the Siachen glacier in Kashmir – the tragedy killed nearly 130 Pakistani troops stationed on the icy peak – would prove the pointlessness of positioning soldiers on such uninhabitable terrain and kick-start negotiations to resolve the conflict. Yet nearly a year later neither Siachen nor the broader Kashmir problem has been taken up. Even if the goodwill and trust gained from trade and visa agreements lead to a commitment to begin negotiating territorial issues, the two sides would face a very difficult negotiation process.

Another obstacle is public sentiment. Despite numerous cross-border civil society initiatives to promote goodwill – media partnerships, academic conferences, literary festivals – hostility and mistrust remain entrenched. A Pew poll released in September 2012 finds 59% of Indians viewing Pakistan unfavourably and 72% of Pakistanis harbouring similar views of India.¹

Additionally, in Pakistan, hardline narratives about Indian expansionism remain prevalent. They allege Indian “encirclement” of Pakistan through its activities in Afghanistan (as underscored by New Delhi’s recent strategic agreement with Kabul) and through its establishment of military bases across Central Asia. They blame India’s intelligence service for Karachi’s street violence, Baluchistan’s unrest, and tribal area terrorism, and contend that India’s military formations exclusively target Pakistan (in fact, because of rising fears about China, India is strengthening its armed presence on its eastern flank). Even mere trade ties with India come in for withering criticism: such links, according to a September 2012 media commentary, could “allow our enemy to shatter and scatter the very foundations of our country”.²

Beyond the genteel confines of Pakistan’s shrinking liberal sphere, and beyond the millions of impoverished and ill Pakistanis too busy struggling to survive to think about India, such views are quite widespread.

1 Pew Research Center/Global Attitude Project, *Deepening Economic Doubts in India*, September 10th 2012, <http://www.pew-global.org/files/2012/09/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Project-India-Report-FINAL-September-10-2012.pdf>.
2 Ali Sukhanver, “A threat to Pakistan’s existence”, *Pakistan Observer*, September 14th 2012, <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=173269>.

Neutralising these narratives will prove difficult because of their popularity among two new, yet influential cohorts of Pakistani political culture. One is the Difa-e-Pakistan Council, a collaborative of militant organisations and conservative religious parties that regularly rails against India. The other is the latest crop of Pakistani military officers, the first officer corps generation to have graduated from schools using the fervently anti-India curriculum introduced by President Zia ul-Haq in the late 1970s.

Indians, meanwhile, remain furious at Pakistan for not pursuing legal proceedings against the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai attacks – militants who, in New Delhi’s view, received support from the Pakistani security establishment. They also resent how Islamabad aligns itself with Beijing, contending that such diplomacy hastens China’s encirclement of India. Additionally, New Delhi fears Pakistan’s nuclear policy, which it believes contains an ambiguous threat of first use of nuclear weapons that enables Islamabad to escalate any small battle into nuclear conflict. The September Pew poll finds Indians regarding the Pakistani state as more of a threat than either China or the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) militant group – entities of great concern to the Indian security establishment.

Reasons for hope and caution

However, despite these obstacles, there is reason to remain optimistic. This is because of an emerging shift in Islamabad’s foreign policy strategy triggered in part by its dysfunctional relations with the U.S. With prospects for a deep, long-term relationship with Washington growing ever more remote, Islamabad has intensified its efforts to improve relations with its regional neighbours. Such diplomacy has targeted India, along with Russia, Iran and even Afghanistan. Islamabad’s recent comments about eventually launching a military operation against anti-Afghanistan militants in North Waziristan likely represent more of an attempt to conciliate Kabul than a gesture to curry favour with Washington.

Pakistan has also concluded that progress on softer issues – such as trade and visas – will build momentum to tackle the more difficult security

and territorial issues. In the words of Pakistan’s high commissioner in New Delhi, Salman Bashir, “The only way to move forward is to work on all these other fronts”.

Although India takes a more cautious approach to normalisation than does Pakistan, its behaviour also gives cause for hope. In the summer of 2011 militants staged attacks in Mumbai. This happened less than three years after the 2008 terror strikes, carried out by Pakistan-based terrorists and described by many Indians as their 9/11. In 2008 many Indians believed their government was wrong not to retaliate against Pakistan, and Indian security analysts suggested that New Delhi would not be so restrained next time. However, after the 2011 attacks India did not retaliate against – much less threaten – Pakistan. Instead, it pledged to work with its western neighbour to apprehend the perpetrators (who remain unidentified).

The relationship faced another test just weeks later when an Indian military helicopter drifted into Pakistani airspace. In past years Pakistan may have shot down the aircraft, yet on this occasion Islamabad let it land. After a brief period in custody, the crew members returned home unharmed.

These incidents bode well for eventual full-fledged normalisation. However, given the subcontinent’s volatility, it would be foolish to regard this outcome as assured – or that it will inevitably be achieved in a peaceful process. In fact, normalisation could spark a backlash that might usher in a new era of unrest.

The chief risk is that anti-India extremist organisations with probable ties to the Pakistani security establishment – such as the LeT – could turn on their long-time patron and declare an anti-government insurgency. This strategy would follow the lead of other extremists who ceased to be assets for Pakistan in 2001, after President Pervez Musharraf concluded a security agreement with Washington that prompted him to renounce ties with many radical groups.

LeT forces – perhaps working with the Pakistani Taliban – could take aim at Islamabad from Pakistan proper. Or they could pour into eastern Afghanistan, where the international troop

presence will soon be greatly diminished from current levels, and establish new staging grounds for assaults on Pakistan. This would dramatically escalate the cross-border attacks that currently target Pakistan and pose yet another test for a fragile Afghan government desperately attempting to establish some semblance of stability.

Europe's role

Of course, even with all these obstacles, India-Pakistan peace is very much worth pursuing – and Europe can help. It can offer to mediate back-channel negotiations and can sponsor vocational training programmes, civic education classes on non-violence, and other efforts in both countries that help reduce the potential for radical anti-India and anti-Pakistan sentiment.

Europe, however, will need to be judicious in its interventions. Trade diplomacy is proceeding well and requires no outside involvement. It is also important to recognise the sensitivity of the territorial spats, and especially how India is often leery of external mediation because of its traditional preference for the territorial status quo in Jammu and Kashmir.

Ultimately, the most advisable course is one of patience. The pursuit of India-Pakistan peace could take years, if not decades. If it is eventually attained, new challenges – including new campaigns of violence – will undoubtedly arise. Nonetheless, with both sides genuinely committed to improving the relationship, there is good reason to believe that this patience will eventually be rewarded.