



## REVIVING THE DIALOGUE WITH PAKISTAN **A NEW AGENDA FOR INDIA**



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The Indo-Pak dialogue process is all set to be revived. Again. The issues and problems are well known. To an extent, the solutions and answers are also widely discussed and relatively known as well. The real issue is how to reach from point A to point B.

With a new government in New Delhi (and Islamabad as well), and new Foreign Secretaries in both the capitals, perhaps, there is an opportunity. From an Indian perspective, it will certainly be a challenge for the new Foreign Secretary. He has a credible record in China and the US; will he be able to add an Indo-Pak feather to his cap as well?

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*Views expressed are author's own.*

The question of whether to talk to Pakistan seems to have already been settled with the visit of the new Indian Foreign Secretary to Pakistan. Also the fact that the Foreign Secretary visited Islamabad as a part of the "SAARC Yatra" and the forthcoming visits of the Prime Minister to Sri Lanka and the Maldives indicate a new regional push by India.

This essay projects a bilateral and regional agenda for India in engaging with Pakistan.

### **I** **DIALOGUE WITH PAKISTAN:** **NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

Despite the recent downswing in the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, there is an opportunity for Mr Jaishankar to reshape the dialogue process with Pakistan and make it credible and productive.

## International Pressure

Critics point to the international (read: American) pressure on India to re-start the dialogue. It is widely accepted that during his recent visit to India, Obama underlined the US interest in India resuming the stalled dialogue with Pakistan. It should thus be read as more than a coincidence that the Indian Prime Minister decided to pick up the phone and wish his Pakistani counterpart on the eve of the Cricket World Cup.

There has also been intense pressure on Pakistan. Besides the multiple visits by Kerry to Islamabad, numerous blunt American messages have also been delivered to Rawalpindi. While both the Sharifs will not agree to this factor in public, it is widely believed that the military and political leaderships in Pakistan have been asked to reach out to both India and Afghanistan.

## Pakistan's Domestic Compulsions

For India, Pakistan's domestic compulsions also present a great opportunity in terms of making the dialogue process productive. A section does talk about the Taliban as an existential threat to Pakistan, and links the problem to the skewed policies of Islamabad and Rawalpindi in using militants and jihad as a foreign policy strategy towards India and Afghanistan.

The 'India threat' is no more the primary one for Pakistan. In their own words, jihadi and sectarian violence pose an existential threat to Pakistan. Recent attacks by the sectarian and jihadi militants within Pakistan, especially since Nawaz Sharif took over as the Prime Minister, even question the capability of the Establishment to control them. Until recently, the primary narrative within Pakistan was related to the 'will' of the

State and not its capacity to control the non-State actors; since the latter were seen as stooges and trump cards of the former, they were not considered a 'threat' but rather as a trump card. Today, a section within Pakistan fears the ability of the State to control and roll back extremist violence within.

A larger fear for the civil society is related to another question: what if the jihadi and militant narratives have infiltrated the Establishment? This question is being raised over the 'insider' collusion in some of the spectacular militant attacks that have taken place in Pakistan in recent years.

## Developments across the Durand Line

Recent developments along Pakistan's western border are both an opportunity and challenge. Under Ashraf Ghani, the new Afghan President, there has been a substantial upswing in Pak-Afghan relations, including a possible dialogue between with the Taliban.

Will increased Af-Pak interactions be only detrimental to India's interests, or will a stable Durand Line provide an opportunity for India? (This argument is further explained later in this essay, under the section "Afghanistan as an Opportunity.")

Unfortunately, a section in India sees improved Pak-Afghan relations in black and white in the same manner it demonises the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative of China. Should India see these two as essentially anti-Indian, or pursue them as a new opportunity and try to leverage and enhance its own interests? India can work on this new reality and attempt to leverage where it benefits, and draw a line where it does not.

## BJP-PDP understanding in J&K

Given the renewal of Pakistan's attempts to internationalise J&K again, the recent understanding between the two main parties - the BJP and the PDP - in forming the government for the state legislative assembly should be another opportunity for India.

Though the election to the J&K legislative assembly was successful in terms of participation and inclusivity, the two leading political parties could not reach an understanding to form the government until late February. After campaigning on diverse issues, it was not easy to reach a common minimum understanding on controversial issues such as Article 370, AFSPA and the inclusion of J&K in bilateral processes with Pakistan.

In March 2015, the situation is different, with the BJP and PDP forming a coalition government in J&K. Both the parties have reached a minimum understanding in working together on the above issues. Both at the national and international levels, the formation of a coalition government following successful democratic elections should provide enormous confidence to India to discuss J&K. Especially with Pakistan, there is no need to revert to the old defensive rhetoric that J&K is an internal issue, and there is nothing to talk about. As discussed later in this section, the issue is not related only to the 'Kashmir Valley' and the 'Kashmiris' but also to other regions and communities including those under the occupation of Pakistan, and other issues including violations and positive movements across the Line of Control (LoC).

## II REVIVING THE DIALOGUE: A FEW POINTERS

Revival and closure of the bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan have remained seasonal since the 1990s. The dialogue process is more cyclical in nature, with emotional breakthroughs, high profile visits, new initiatives, militant attacks and painful suspensions. The dialogue, for reasons well known, could not establish a unilinear movement. It has not only become seasonal, but also predictable.

Given the limitations and challenges, if not the failures of such initiatives, should India and Pakistan pursue the same path? Or should they bring fresh inputs and adopt different strategies?

### A. Compartmentalise the Composite Dialogue

The idea of a composite Indo-Pak dialogue as proposed in the 1990s was a novel approach at that time. Perhaps, it would be easier to continue with the same approach. But, how effective and relevant would it be in 2015?

If India has to plan for the next ten years in terms of a stable Indo-Pak process that will help achieve its own interests in the region, and vis-à-vis Pakistan, will the composite process help New Delhi, or be a hindrance? In the past, has the 'composite' nature of dialogue helped India take the process forward with Pakistan, or has it undermined it?

From an Indian perspective, of the eight issues identified for the composite dialogue, some are challenging and the rest are doable. There have been reports of how close both countries were to resolving a particular issue, say Siachen or Sir Creek. However, the composite nature

of the dialogue has restricted India and Pakistan to reach a spectacular success on an individual item, as the nature of dialogue requires overall progress. Unfortunately, failure on one issue has had a domino effect on the others.

Can a new compartmentalised approach help the process to be more effective, and insulate it from the failure of one issue spilling over into the others?

Perhaps, the Indo-Pak approach on the Indus Waters Treaty could be a model. Though there are serious problems in the sharing of the waters, an independent Indus Waters Commission and its regular meetings outside the Indo-Pak composite dialogue calendar could be a model for multiple issues between India and Pakistan. Such a process could help the two countries reach an understanding and

even resolve a particular issue once and for all. It could even have a positive domino effect on the others!

There are bound to be numerous differences in pursuing the components of the composite dialogue through the Indus model. For example, the Indus Commission was formed after a long dialogue between India and Pakistan with the World Bank arbitrating the same. More importantly, the Indus Water Commission is a result and provision of a bilateral treaty, and thus an end product. What is being suggested is the opposite; a model that will act as a process, resulting in an agreement/treaty between the two countries.

The above is only a proposal and a model, but worth considering since the existing composite approach has not been

### *Establish an Indo-Pak Nuclear Commission*

Like the Indus Water Commission, India and Pakistan could consider establishing an exclusive Indo-Pak Nuclear Commission that will have regular meetings and discuss substantial nuclear issues than just exchanging data.

Though a bilateral agreement between the two countries provides for exchange of information regarding nuclear facilities, this is more a ritual than of any substantial significance. This agreement provides for exchanging data that in reality is already known by the other side.

In the nuclear context, what is needed is a larger and regular discussion on doctrines and weapon systems. There is much ambiguity at multiple levels, and deterrence cannot work in an environment totally surrounded by ambiguity and misperceptions. While there can never be complete transparency on these issues, there should be a dialogue between the two countries to avoid misunderstandings

Since there is enough work undertaken at the track-II level, besides the voluminous literature published by think-tanks, research institutes and the academic community on both these issues, it would be even useful to bring them into the above Commission/Council as advisory bodies or consultants.

effective. If not the Indus model, there could be other models worth emulating as well, which could help compartmentalise the dialogue.

### **B. Insulate and Institutionalise Individual Dialogues with an Independent Calendar**

Along with compartmentalising the dialogue, India should also suggest the institutionalisation of each of the dialogue components in terms of an independent process and a calendar for meetings. Such a process will help both countries insulate meetings at the technical level from larger developments. It will even help these meetings to proceed further, irrespective of movements on other areas of the bilateral dialogue.

For example, given recent developments, a dialogue relating to nuclear weapons, strategies and deterrence is essential. Clubbing it in the regular 'security' basket, and discussing the same along with the other components of the dialogue could be even more counter-productive.

### **C. Gas and Electricity as Big Ticket Items**

For an Indo-Pak dialogue to be a spectacular success, there have to be a few big ticket items. While on the negative side, Kashmir has remained a big ticket item in not allowing the bilateral process to move forward, there is no corresponding positive big ticket item in the bilateral dialogue.

In the absence of such a big ticket item, India and Pakistan invariably end up producing a huge laundry list involving everything.

While the process will have to be comprehensive and include every item, it also needs a big ticket item. The primary function of such big ticket item(s) would be to create a huge political and economic stake in a collaborative project that will

catch domestic and international attention. The present level interactions, or the lack of them, are susceptible to vested interests spoiling them, and the indifference of domestic opinion. Even more importantly, there will have to be a commitment by the international community to ensure that the bilateral ups and downs do not impinge on the big ticket items. The Indus Water Commission, for example, continued to function even during the worst phase of Indo-Pak relations; perhaps, the World Bank's backing of the process ensured that the above process did not suffer.

Elsewhere, in the post Second World War era, cooperation on coal and steel was the big ticket item. The European Union was not built in a single day; its success today has been widely traced to the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), formed after the Treaty of Paris in 1951 with a few countries including France, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy.

It will not be an exaggeration to conclude that coal and steel revolutionised post-World War-II Europe. It overcame the differences between France and Germany and stitched the entire region together. In South and Central Asia, gas and electricity could play a similar role.

There have been multiple discussions on two pipeline projects – Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) - and although the gas went cold; today there is a rejuvenation on both the projects. The IPI did not move forward due to American pressure on India and Pakistan to go slow in working with Iran. US-Iran relations today are undergoing significant transformation; with the US now working hard to strike a nuclear deal with Iran, there is the expectation that it could also

transform the larger American approach towards Tehran.

Similarly, the TAPI faced more hurdles than making any substantial progress until a few years back. With the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) renewed interest in the project today, there has been a new turn around. Meetings at the highest level in the last two years highlight the forward movement on the TAPI.

IPI and TAPI can thus become the big ticket items for India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Besides the gas pipelines, there has been a spectacular movement in establishing an electricity grid between Central Asia and South Asia. Referred to as CASA 1000, although the project currently focuses on constructing an electricity grid linking Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in Central Asia

with Afghanistan and Pakistan in South Asia. Naturally gifted with abundant hydel power, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan generate surplus electricity, especially in summer. With international support, the above four countries have finalised the basic agreements in the last two years, which includes the pricing. Construction of transmission lines are to begin shortly.

With a strong push from the US, including a substantial financial assistance package, the CASA 1000 project is likely to move forward at a faster pace. Besides the CASA 1000, there is yet another project – the TUTAP — involving Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), this project is also aimed at building an energy corridor with the above countries.

If India, Pakistan and Afghanistan have to work ingeniously, they could become both

## 'Gas and Electricity Community in South Asia'

### *Propose a Regional Energy Dialogue*

With the right regional momentum and international support, gas and electricity could revolutionise South Asia, as coal and steel did Europe. Just as EU had a humble beginning with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), South Asia could also start with a Gas and Electricity Community.

As the ECSC began with Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, let the SAGEC begin with India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Consider bringing Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh subsequently. And Iran, Myanmar and the Central Asian countries. And perhaps even China!

This could even be India's long-term answer to the belt and road initiative of China. Let China work at the pan-Asian and Indian Ocean levels; India could work across South Asia, linking Central Asia and West Asia on its West, and Southeast Asia on its east.

Who knows, 30 years down the lane, South Asia may even win the Nobel award for peace, as the EU did!

the destination and transit countries for an energy network linking Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh in the east. Both Bhutan and Nepal have untapped hydel power; with the right investments and technical agreements, they could become the Kyrghystan and Tajikistan of South Asia, with abundant hydel resources.

#### **D. Afghanistan as an Opportunity**

Afghanistan is likely to, or perhaps has already emerged, as the most important bilateral issue between the two countries. Is the presence of one in Afghanistan essentially antithetical to the other? Is there a positive space for both the countries in Afghanistan? Can India and Pakistan leverage each other's presence in Afghanistan, help Kabul to stabilise and in the process get something in return as well? In short, can Afghanistan be pursued as an opportunity by India and Pakistan?

Withdrawal of the American-led international forces and the shift of global attention to Syria, Iraq and the Islamic State provides a further opportunity for the countries in the region to come together. Especially, India, Pakistan, Iran along with China and Central Asia, who can work together on a common agenda that would help everyone, and make Afghanistan the glue, instead of a political and strategic chessboard. Afghanistan is the real link between South Asia, China, Central Asia and West Asia.

Pakistan is bound to bring Afghanistan into the dialogue process. What should be the formal Indian response? Should India see Pakistan's presence in Afghanistan as essentially negative? Can India leverage the improved Pak-Afghan relations?

There has been too much emphasis on Ashraf Ghani's overtures to Pakistan. India

#### **'Kabul as a Strategic Pivot'**

##### ***Propose a Regional Dialogue on Afghanistan***

As mentioned above, Afghanistan could be the link and glue for South Asia. Not only for gas and electricity but also for trade and transit. If Pakistan wants to bring Afghanistan into the dialogue process, we should welcome it and talk about the above issues. We should even propose a regional dialogue on Afghanistan.

Historically, India has been linked with Afghanistan and beyond through the Grand Trunk road; it may not be as historical and as often used as the Silk Road; but it has a substantial history linking Kabul with Kolkata. In fact, the GT Road should be the primary component of the larger Asian Rail and Road links, linking three major regions of Asia.

Let the regional dialogue start on Afghanistan, with Islamabad and Kabul, with few other capitals from the region. Let us start this dialogue in Kabul and move around to Ashgabad, Almaty, Teheran, Islamabad, New Delhi, Dhaka and Singapore. Let us also consider Moscow and Beijing subsequently. This could compliment the "Heart of Asia" process as well, besides providing a substantial role for India in a regional dialogue on Afghanistan.

Coffee in Tashkent, breakfast in Kabul, Lunch in Lahore, Tea in Delhi, Dinner in Dhaka and a late night tango in Bangkok is a theoretical possibility.

has its own leverage both at the political and popular levels. Ashraf Ghani may be the President, but he is not the sole authority of the Afghan political power. India still has influential friends at the ruling level. More importantly, India has Afghan goodwill, unrivalled by any other country. The number of daily flights from Kabul to New Delhi, and the number of Afghan students from Chandigarh to Bangalore tells a different tale.

Unfortunately, a section sees Ashraf Ghani's overtures to Pakistan as the only yardstick of Indo-Afghan relations. If New Delhi is not pitching to be an Afghan security provider, and is more interested in contributing to the Afghan economy and infrastructure, a clear redline can be established vis-à-vis the Indian presence and Pakistan's objections. If Pakistan

wants to walk further into Afghanistan, India should welcome it, as long as it does not affect India's interests. India is obsessed in seeing Afghanistan as Pakistan's strategic depth and ignores how the former has also become a strategic trap for the latter. A section within Pakistan also understands this; there has been a new debate within Pakistan in terms of re-strategising their priorities vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Let India make use of this.

### **E. J&K and Cross-LoC Expansion**

J&K has to be the primary component in the bilateral dialogue. Given the recent resumption of its obsession with Kashmir, Pakistan is bound to bring it to the forefront in the dialogue process again. India will have to address this issue head-

### **Consolidate Cross-LoC Trade before Expanding**

There are a few processes already in place vis-à-vis J&K. India should attempt to consolidate them, before attempting any expansion. A recent report in a national daily mentioned about a new proposal to open eight more points across the LoC for trade. Given the success of cross-LoC trade (or the lack of it) in the two existing points in Poonch and Salamabad, any expansion without addressing the basic problem will be counterproductive in both the short and long terms.

The trade initiative across the LoC needs better financial facilities, a larger trade basket and easy movement of goods and businessmen, rather than opening more points to trade. India and Pakistan see trade as a political CBM, whereas the business community in J&K sees this as an economic opportunity. In fact, even the business community outside J&K sees this as an economic opportunity and uses proxy traders to make use of the facilities!

Opening more trading points, without addressing the basic problems of cross-LoC trade will only increase the frustrations and emphasise the sentiment that both countries are not serious. In fact, such a sentiment has already started having a domino effect and is spreading beyond the business communities in J&K.

Cross-LoC trade openings will have to be selective; instead of opening more points for trade and travel, (for example, across Mirpur, Gurez and Turtuk) the existing processes need to be simplified for the movement of people and goods. In the 21st century, two parts of J&K cannot trade as the Romans did with the Persians!



on, rather than circumventing it. The formation of a government led by the PDP-BJP combine in J&K should give an additional advantage to India now. By all means, India should include the Kashmiri leadership in the dialogue; there are already representatives in J&K elected by a free and fair process.

India and Pakistan will have to work for a final settlement of the Kashmir issue, satisfying every stakeholder and not just Pakistan and its stooges in Kashmir. Until a final agreement is reached through an inclusive dialogue involving all parties and segments from the Sust dry port in Gilgit to the Lakhanpur post in Jammu, both countries will have to continue with their cross-LoC arrangements. For long, India has been extremely defensive of its position on 'J&K' and has allowed

Pakistan to make it a 'Kashmir' issue involving 'Kashmiris' only. Let there be a discussion on all the issues relating to J&K with all parties concerned.

### *Keep the Peace along the LoC*

While the 2004 agreement between India and Pakistan ensured that the LoC remained peaceful, recent months have witnessed a sudden eruption. While at the highest levels, India and Pakistan will remain the real issue and reason, they could move beyond the rhetoric that is witnessed at the popular level.

Both countries will have to keep their redlines intact and ensure that the sanctity of the LoC is respected. India's strong resolve and disproportionate response to the LoC violations by Pakistan has jolted both Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

### *Ensure the Opening of the Kargil-Skardu Axis*

India should emphasise on the long-pending proposal to open the Kargil-Skardu axis as well. Pakistan has been reluctant and has been avoiding this matter.

If there are divided families across Poonch-Mirpur and Kashmir-Muzaffarabad sectors, there are also divided families across Ladakh and Gilgit Baltistan. While the two routes across Poonch and Salamabad provides an opportunity for the first two sub-regions of J&K, the Balti region has been totally ignored. From Turtuk to Kargil on the Indian side, there are smany divided families across the LoC. Economically, the Skardu-Kargil link was a part of the erstwhile Silk Route, linking Gilgit and Central Asia in the north, and Leh, Amritsar and Lhasa in the south and east respectively.

### *Consider Cross-LoC Tourism*

The movement of people has remained restricted only to the members of the divided families. While a substantial number of families have been divided, there has also been a complete uprooting and movement families from one part to the other, leaving their property behind. This section, today may not have a family member on the other side to invite or host. But given the tendency to have a to have a bond with one's place of birth, many residents of J&K would like to visit the other side, especially their place sof birth.

Cross-LoC tourism has the potential to move beyond the divided families and create multiple stakeholders in all the major communities of J&K: Muslim, Hindu and the Sikh. And perhaps even the Buddhist.

The bluff has been called off, and Rawalpindi is aware of the new dispensation in New Delhi.

Once the two countries have decided to maintain peace and tranquility, they should stick to the same and not provoke the other side unnecessarily. After having provoked, neither side should attempt to hide and accuse the other for engaging in a disproportionate response. Both sides should stick to the original resolve and avoid any provocation, thereby preventing any further response.

### III WHOM TO TALK TO IN PAKISTAN? AND THROUGH WHOM?

Unlike India, Pakistan's decision-making process has a structure of its own. India's process is led by the Prime Minister, with substantial inputs from the civilian bureaucracy led by its numerous ministries, with minimal or no input from its military. Although Pakistan's process is led by the Prime Minister, the power lies with its military.

India has been dealing with democratic and military leaderships in Pakistan and elsewhere as well. The issue for India is unlikely to be "dealing only with a democratic leadership," rather, it would be how to deal with Islamabad, which actually draws its strength and owes not to the Parliament and the Constitution, but to Rawalpindi and the Khakis.

This in fact is a difficult question, and does not have easy answers. If there is a power imbalance within Pakistan, the challenge is not faced by India alone in dealing with Islamabad and the elected leadership.

Democracies from the US to Australia also face the same challenge and have been dealing with Islamabad and (perhaps through?) Rawalpindi. Can New Delhi also follow the model established by Washington DC and other democracies in dealing with Islamabad and Rawalpindi? Can India also talk to both the Sharifs?

Finally, both countries should avoid public diplomacy and talks through the media. They should revert to silent and back-door diplomacy. Given the nature of issues, transparency can wait; silent, back-channel diplomacy will be more effective for any long-term success.

Domestic equations within the primary stakeholders may be an issue in this context. While the PMO and the MEA are the primary movers of India's foreign policy, Islamabad does not have the same luxury. The military establishment in Pakistan also has a position and perhaps even an agenda, and it is being suggested that India should talk to both the Sharifs—silent diplomacy would support such a process. Any bilateral dialogue will have to accept this reality. India is at a disadvantageous position on this issue and will have to plan accordingly.

Silent, back-channel diplomacy will provide more space to communicate and understand each other, leading to better decisions.

Obviously, none of the above will work if Pakistan's Establishment believes in continuing its strategy of using the jihadis as a trump card against India. That should be India's bottom-line.



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