

Strategic Analysis Paper

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India-Pakistan Relations: How Can They Be Improved?

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Key Points

- There is a need to embrace an overarching strategic stability regime and to shun aggressive security doctrines to reduce the possibility of a nuclear conflict.
- The problems of terrorism and Non-State Actors need to be addressed jointly through institutionalised mechanisms.
- Water issues should be resolved through the mechanisms provided by the Indus Basin Treaty and should not be allowed to degenerate into a serious source of conflict.
- Confidence-building measures should be pursued to alleviate the “trust deficit” but should not be used as a substitute for the resolution of disputes.
- Economic co-operation and trade should be facilitated to develop mutuality of interest.
- India and Pakistan need to understand each other’s legitimate interests in Afghanistan and pursue them without coming into conflict with each other.

Summary

In the last 65 years, India and Pakistan have been unable to resolve their differences and develop a normal good neighbourly relationship, which could have benefitted people on both sides of the border. There have been several attempts to initiate a sustainable peace process, but most were either stillborn or abandoned in their infancy. Does it mean that the two countries are condemned to live in perpetual hostility? Can they overcome their historic

rivalry and emulate the example of France and Germany in the post-World War II era? Are the problems besetting their bilateral relations so intractable that no resolution is possible? Can they set aside their differences for a while and build on commonalities of interests?

Analysis

These and many other such questions can be raised by any concerned observer of the South Asian region, where the disharmony between the two major players has adversely affected the ability of the region as a whole to attain its true potential, unlike, for instance, the advancements made in the ASEAN region. The continued conflict and tension in the relationship between the two countries, whose rivalry has a nuclear dimension as well, cannot be to anyone's benefit. For the past decade or so, their differences have transcended their common borders and have also played out in Afghanistan. The biggest beneficiaries of this prolonged conflict have been the extremist elements in both countries and, more recently, the non-state actors (NSAs). The NSAs seemingly have the capability to disrupt and derail any effort towards resolving the outstanding issues between India and Pakistan at will, by perpetrating a violent incident. Major world powers have also promoted their geo-political interests by playing one country off against the other from time to time.

Causes of Conflict

The tensions between India and Pakistan are deeply rooted in their common history. Their failure to reconcile their differences ultimately resulted in the partition of the Sub-continent. The partition itself was the result of a legal and constitutional process approved by both the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. Unfortunately, however, the actual partition was accompanied by mindless blood-letting and lasting acrimony resulting from complaints about the work of the Radcliffe Commission that was entrusted with the demarcation of the boundaries of the two states. The messy procedure adopted by the British for determining the fate of the Princely States sowed the seeds of the continuing conflict over the predominantly Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The festering Kashmir dispute has bedevilled relations between India and Pakistan. It has caused two wars (1948 and 1965), a serious border conflict (Kargil, 1999) and has brought immense suffering and hardship to the people of the state. This unresolved dispute has also been a major drain on the resources of the two countries and has been a stumbling block to normalising relations between them.

A problem closely related to that of Kashmir is the distribution of the water of the rivers flowing from there into Pakistan. Pakistan has a predominantly agrarian economy and, being a lower riparian state, has naturally been concerned about continuation of an adequate supply of irrigation water. The problem was thought to have been resolved in the early 1960s through the Indus Basin Treaty, mediated by the World Bank. But the problem is far from settled, as Pakistan has raised concerns over some of the Indian hydroelectric projects under construction on the western rivers that will affect waters for which Pakistan has the rights. The water problem has a serious potential to precipitate conflict in the future, given the rising requirements and shrinking supplies.

The Nuclear Dimension

Some commentators hoped in 1998 that the overt possession of nuclear weapons by both India and Pakistan would bring about the realisation that any conflict between them would have catastrophic consequences for both countries and would, therefore, result in strategic stability. Unfortunately, that expected peace dividend is yet to be attained. Instead, a steady nuclear weapon and missile competition continues, in the absence of an overarching restraint regime. India has been propounding and war-gaming its provocative “Cold Start” and “pro-active Operations” doctrines since 2004. Pakistan has responded by introducing battlefield nuclear weapons.

Afghanistan

The conflict in Afghanistan has also had spill-over effects on Indo-Pakistani relations. The strategic partnership agreement between India and Afghanistan and the growing Indian presence in that country, have only added to Pakistan’s concerns that India is attempting to squeeze it from both the east and west. With uncertainties surrounding the internal dynamics of a post-NATO Afghanistan, it also could become an arena for India-Pakistan hostility to play out. That would have serious consequences, not only for the peace and stability of Afghanistan, but also for the region as a whole.

Role of Non-State Actors

The problem of Non-State Actors (NSAs) and their trans-frontier activities has been one of the most vexing issues between the two South Asian neighbours in recent years. In the past decade, it has brought the two countries to the verge of war in 2001-02 and again in 2008; it also derailed the Composite Dialogue process between them, which appeared to be regaining some traction after a hiatus of three years. Hopes were further raised by the election of Nawaz Sharif to the office of Prime Minister. Sharif has made no secret of his wish for peace and warmer relations between India and Pakistan, despite the fact that he has not received reciprocation from India. The recent eruption of violence across the Line of Control in Kashmir, which in normal times would be a routine affair, has been blown out of proportion by the Indian media and some political parties with an eye on the forthcoming national elections in India. Incidents such as the attack on the Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi by political activists can only add to the acrimony. Such incidents have compounded the already acute trust deficit between the two countries. India has accused Pakistan of sponsoring “cross-border terrorism” against it and, after the recent cross-LOC incident, blamed the Pakistani Army for fomenting trouble. Pakistan complains that India has provided material support, through Afghanistan, to the insurgents in Baluchistan and parts of the Federally Administered Tribal areas in the north-west and is now unhappy that instead of a responding to peace overtures, India is ratcheting up the anti-Pakistan rhetoric. If the proposed meeting between the two Prime Ministers on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York in September takes place as planned, it will hopefully help in improving the atmospherics of India-Pakistan relations.

Areas of Common Interest

Peace and stability are pre-requisites for economic development, trade and politico-socio-cultural relations. This has assumed added urgency since South Asia has obtained nuclear capability, as there is now little margin for error. It is imperative that the security situation in South Asia is stabilised and made as resistant as possible to the periodic shocks caused by the actions of NSAs. Avoidance of crises, prevention of conflicts and the building of mutual confidence should therefore be common objectives for the two countries.

There is a huge potential for the expansion of bilateral trade between India and Pakistan, especially now that the long-standing issue of Pakistan granting Most Favoured Nation status to India seems closer than ever to being resolved. But other issues, such as non-tariff barriers to trade, will have to be addressed before any positive move can be made towards increasing trade. There is also a long list of items on the negative list which have to be looked at before significant improvement can be achieved. The promotion of official trade will discourage smuggling and other means of illegal trade that at present cost the two countries substantial lost revenue.

The serious energy shortages faced by both countries are hampering their economic development. India cannot maintain a healthy economic growth rate if its energy resources remain inadequate, as was made apparent by the total blackout of northern India in July 2012. In Pakistan, normal public life has been badly disrupted by chronic electricity outages for many years and the scarcity of energy has also adversely affected industrial output.

It would be in the interests of the two countries to forge co-operation in the field of energy. While India has effectively withdrawn from the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, it still seems to be interested in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. TAPI depends largely on peace and stability in Afghanistan, which means that India and Pakistan should have a peaceful and stable Afghanistan as a common cause, rather than competing for influence there. In the much longer term, depending on the overall state of their relations, the two countries could possibly also collaborate in the field of nuclear energy.

How to Achieve the Desired Outcomes

The 1999 Lahore Memorandum of Understanding was the first Indo-Pakistani effort to come to grips with their mutual problems and to explore measures to reduce tensions in a nuclearised South Asia. Though the process was interrupted by the Kargil episode, the proposed confidence-building measures (CBMs) were taken up when the composite dialogue resumed in 2004, resulting in some significant bilateral agreements. It appears, however, that the list of CBMs agreed to at Lahore has been exhausted and currently there seems to be no discernible forward movement in the bilateral talks. It is important that negotiators think of new and innovative CBMs and establish an oversight and review mechanism to monitor the performance of past agreements, to give some impetus to the peace process. But CBMs can only be expected to provide temporary stability at best and, ultimately, the two countries' outstanding political problems, including the Kashmir dispute, will need to be resolved.

The efforts at building confidence and trust and seeking resolution of disputes can only bear fruit if the process is sustained and remains uninterrupted. On many occasions in the recent past, certain groups and individuals opposed to reconciliation between India and Pakistan have succeeded in disrupting the peace efforts. The two countries will have to resist these disruptive forces by evolving institutional mechanisms to deal with them. Past efforts were half-hearted and depended to a large extent on the character and attitudes of the individuals representing the two countries in the Joint Counter-terrorism mechanism.

As the conflict in Afghanistan winds down, India and Pakistan will need to discuss their respective legitimate interests in that country. India will need to convince Pakistan that its interest in Afghanistan is not aimed at opening up a new front in the west or promote destabilisation in the two Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan. For its part, Pakistan will need to reassure India that it respects the legitimate and sovereign rights of India and Afghanistan to develop their bilateral relations. Due to its geographical position, Pakistan can either facilitate or block the trade between India and Afghanistan passing through its territory, but that will be entirely dependent on the state of India-Pakistan relations.

Regular exchanges between the people of the two countries can create better understanding and goodwill. It is sometimes amazing to find how little their people know about each other's countries and their socio-cultural environments, despite the often-repeated claims of having lived side-by-side for a thousand years. Recent initiatives, such as the frequent discussions and exchanges of visits between parliamentarians and politicians from both the federal and regional parliaments, are moves in the right direction and need to be sustained. The agreement for a liberalised visa regime is also a positive development, if implemented in a positive spirit.

As mentioned earlier, neither trade, economic co-operation nor socio-cultural harmonies can yield any dividends in the absence of peace and stability. India and Pakistan, therefore, need to remove the causes of the tensions underpinning their relations. India will have to move away from offensive and provocative military doctrines and Pakistan, which has responded by lowering its nuclear threshold, would need to pull back to a more stable, and less crisis-prone, nuclear posture.

Role of the International Community

The international community can continue to encourage and facilitate an uninterrupted peace dialogue between India and Pakistan. India has always been scornful of foreign mediation between them and prefers bilateral engagement, where it can bring its greater weight to bear. This continues despite the fact that the US involvement during the Kargil crisis went entirely in India's favour. Pakistan, which has in the past sought external balancing and tried to invoke international mediation in its disputes with India, may well be wary of outside intervention after its Kargil experience. Nevertheless, friendly nudging by countries enjoying good relations with both India and Pakistan should be welcome.

On the other hand, however, Australia's decision to sell uranium to India is seen in Pakistan as being detrimental to its national security interests; just as the US-India nuclear deal was viewed as discriminatory and harmful to its security. The recent "Australia in the Asian

Century” White Paper did not even mention Pakistan and would not have been well received there. These developments have, to a large extent, curtailed Australia’s ability to play the role of a facilitator in the India-Pakistan peace process. Its growing politico-economic relations with India, however, do place it in a position to encourage India to remain engaged in the composite dialogue with Pakistan.

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