

Strategic Analysis Paper

3 December 2019

The Kartarpur Corridor Initiative: Can It Be a Corridor of Peace and Prosperity in South Asia?

Tridivesh Singh Maini
FDI Visiting Fellow

Key Points

- The Kartarpur Corridor, between India and Pakistan, has immense significance for the Sikh Community, which has long wanted easier access to its important shrines in Pakistan.
- The Corridor could pave the way for closer linkages between East Panjab (in India), and West Punjab, in Pakistan. Achieving that will require considerable leadership on the part of both countries.
- While the India-Pakistan relationship is complex – with tensions currently running high – the Corridor is a positive development that could, in the long run, open up new opportunities for increased people-to-people links and greater economic ties.

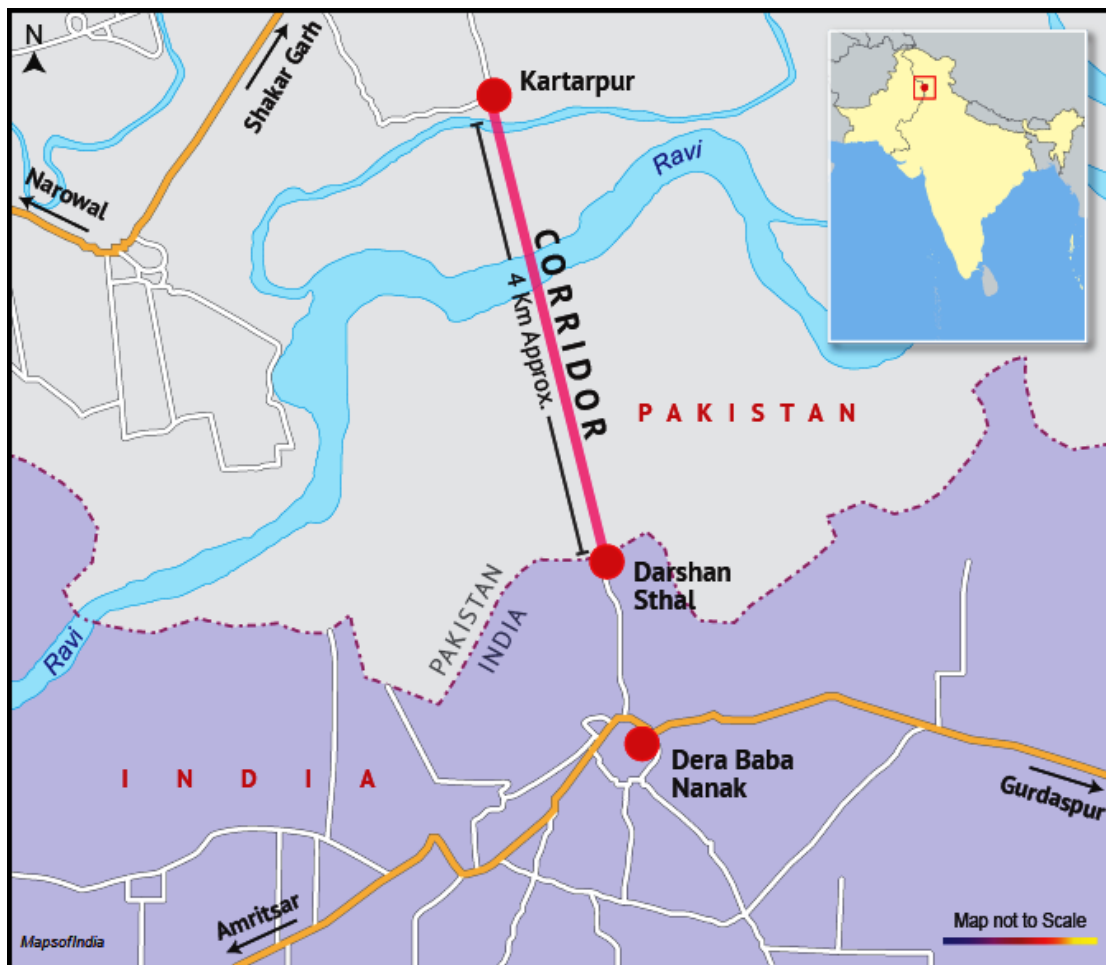
Summary

In recent weeks, the media and policymakers in South Asia and beyond have closely followed developments pertaining to the Kartarpur Corridor. The Corridor, opened despite tensions between India and Pakistan over the past year, was inaugurated on 9 November by Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Imran Khan, on their respective sides of the India-Pakistan border.

The Kartarpur Corridor will enable Sikhs and other devotees, from India and overseas, of the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak Dev, to pay their respects, without needing a visa, at the holy shrine of Darbar Sahib, in Kartarpur, in the Narowal district of Pakistan. Guru Nanak

spent the last 17 years of his life at Kartarpur (which town he founded), and propagated the Sikh faith there, along with his followers. Sikhs the world over commemorated the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak’s birthday on 12 November 2019, giving added significance to the inauguration of the Corridor. The Corridor connects Dera Baba Nanak (in India), with Kartarpur, a distance of less than five kilometres.

Although it is still early days, the Corridor is an initiative that has the potential to be a positive force in the India-Pakistan relationship by contributing to a general reduction in tensions, while also helping to facilitate to greater economic linkages and increased people-to-people ties over the border.



Analysis

Inauguration

According to the agreement, signed by both countries, those wanting to use the Corridor will still need to present their passport to cross the border. A number of individuals and [groups](#) have stated that a considerable number of Indian citizens do not possess passports, thus they will be unable to pay obeisance at Darbar Sahib under the present rules and regulations. The number of individuals crossing the border through the corridor in the first

few days after its inauguration was [low](#), numbering only in the hundreds, while the infrastructure has been created for up to 5,000 people to cross over daily. Since 24 November, there has been an increase in the number of pilgrims making the crossing, with the number now surpassing [1,000](#).

The need to present a [passport](#), as well as other logistical issues, including certain related and complicated [paperwork requirements](#) placed on visits by the Indian side, have been cited as reasons for deterring large numbers of individuals from utilising the Corridor.

Interestingly, 9 November also marked the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. While analysts and politicians were cautious in talking about the impact of the Corridor on the bilateral relationship, a number of references were made to the fact that the corridor was being inaugurated on the auspicious anniversary date. Pakistani Foreign Minister, [Shah Mahmood Qureshi](#), speaking before the opening of the Corridor, stated that if the Berlin Wall could be 'brought down', the possibility of more open borders between India and Pakistan could not be ruled out. Some [strategic analysts](#) have also drawn parallels between both developments, while still taking into account the complexities of the India-Pakistan relationship and the dynamics of South Asia, which are, of course, significantly different.

International Focus

It is interesting to note that the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor, which comes at a time when diplomatic ties between India and Pakistan are at rock bottom, is being watched closely by the United States and China.

Many of those travelling through the Corridor to pay obeisance at Darbar Sahib, will actually come from all over the world – including the US. A large number of individuals, who have been lobbying not just for the Corridor, but also for greater access to other Sikh shrines in Pakistan, are also US citizens. From a geopolitical standpoint, the Corridor is an important confidence-building measure between the two countries, and the US, which has been urging restraint, made exactly that point in some recent statements. The State Department welcomed the signing of the Kartarpur Agreement in October 2019, with Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus [describing](#) the Kartarpur project as 'impressive' and an important step towards 'promoting greater religious freedom'. Ms Ortagus also observed that, '...This impressive project will transform a remote, three-acre site across a sensitive international boundary. Congratulations to India and Pakistan on this initiative.'

China, too, has welcomed the Kartarpur Corridor initiative. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman [Geng Shuang](#), in an interaction with the media on 11 November, stated that China welcomed such 'good interactions' between both countries. Geng Shuang also spoke of the hope that both countries would resolve their differences through dialogue, and work towards regional peace.

Inauguration Speeches

The United States, China and other countries would also do well to pay close attention to some of the speeches made at the inauguration on the Pakistani side. One of the important issues raised was the need for more open borders between the two Punjab states. Former

cricketer, Navjot Singh Sidhu, a former Minister from the state of Panjab (India), and who has been credited by many for giving a boost to the Kartarpur Corridor initiative through his personal friendship with Pakistani PM Imran Khan, praised Mr Khan for agreeing to establish the Corridor, which has been a long-standing demand of the Sikh community. Sidhu also gave credit to Indian PM Narendra Modi for going ahead with the Corridor, and said that the opening of the Corridor was also a [balm](#) for both the Punjabs, which had borne the brunt of Partition. Sidhu went on to state, that it was important now to build on this spirit of goodwill, and to enhance the economic linkages between India and Pakistan in general, and the two Punjabs in particular. Earlier efforts had been made to strengthen economic links and people-to-people ties between both the Punjabs, but strained ties between New Delhi and Islamabad have been a significant impediment to that initiative. Now with the opening of the Corridor, it has been argued that, in spite of the continuing tensions between the two countries, cross-border [Punjab-Panjab](#) linkages could receive an important boost.

While the Pakistani PM did refer to the Kashmir issue during his speech, he also spoke about the importance of increased economic linkages between India and Pakistan, and the need for both countries to fight poverty.

The expectation that the Corridor will help to improve bilateral ties is realistic, and is evident from the views of analysts, journalists and even political leaders. Former Indian Prime Minister, [Dr Manmohan Singh](#), who was part of the first group from India to pay obeisance at Kartarpur, while welcoming the opening of the Corridor, also noted that the India-Pakistan relationship is '... subject to many buts and ifs'.

Many in South Asia and beyond will be hoping that the Kartarpur Corridor initiative paves the way for a more harmonious relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad. The US and China, along with many other countries, too, will be observing the overall impact of the Corridor on India-Pakistan ties, and whether it can not only contribute to a reduction in tensions, but also help to facilitate to greater economic linkages and increased people-to-people ties.

About the Author: Tridivesh Singh Maini is a New Delhi-based Policy Analyst and FDI Visiting Fellow.

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
Suite 5, 202 Hampden Road, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 6389 0211
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au