



Comprehensive dialogue between India and Pakistan

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1 Introduction

India Pakistan relation has always been full of ups and downs due to involvement of non-state actors in the bilateral relations. In December last year, Seven years after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, India and Pakistan had agreed to resume structured dialogue between them. India decided to restart the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue. The dialogue that was earlier known as Composite Dialogue and later on known as Resumed Dialogue now known as the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue. But the terrorist attack on the Pathankot airbase has succeeded in deferring—though not entirely burying—the prospects of talks between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan.

2 Historical Perspective

Relations between India and Pakistan have been complex due to a number of historical and political events. Relations between the two states have been defined by the violent partition of British India in 1947, the Kashmir conflict and the numerous military conflicts fought between the two nations. Consequently, even though the two South Asian nations share linguistic, cultural, geographic, and economic links, their relationship has been plagued by hostility and suspicion.

Since their independence, the two countries have fought three major wars, one undeclared war and have been involved in numerous armed skirmishes and military standoffs. The Kashmir conflict is the main center-point of all of these conflicts. There have been numerous attempts to improve the relationship—notably, the Shimla summit, the Agra summit and the Lahore summit. Since the early 1980s, relations between the two nations soured particularly after the Siachen conflict, the intensification of Kashmir insurgency in 1989, Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998 and the 1999 Kargil war.

Certain confidence-building measures — such as the 2003 ceasefire agreement and the Delhi–Lahore Bus service – were successful in deescalating tensions. However, these efforts have been impeded by periodic terrorist attacks. The 2001 Indian Parliament attack almost brought the two nations to the brink of a nuclear war. The 2007 Samjhauta Express bombings, which killed 68 civilians was also a crucial point in relations. Additionally, the 2008 Mumbai attacks carried out by Pakistani militants resulted in a severe blow to the ongoing India-Pakistan peace talks

3 Bureaucratic engagement vs. Back channel talks (Track I Vs Track II/III talks)

In amidst of the less trust among the India-Pakistan government after the Pathankot attack, the utility of the back channel talks has again surfaced. Both government wants to engage, but the attacked has dented the momentum of the process.

A book titled Neither a Hawk nor a Dove, penned by former Pakistani foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri and released in Lahore this week, for the first time provides an in-depth account of the Back-Channel dialogue between the two countries that took place during his tenure between 2005 and 2008. The process does offer both a way, and the hope of how the two countries can gainfully engage with each other.

Away from the media glare and with both sides keeping a lid on the progress of the talks, the two interlocutors, India's Satinder K. Lambah and Pakistan's Tariq Aziz, seemed to have come remarkably close to an agreement on the Kashmir imbroglio.

In the current scenario, government strategy becomes critically dependent on opening a back channel to Pakistan. The sooner the back channel diplomacy begins the better. All things concerned, the government is skating on thin ice. Without back channel diplomacy, the prospects for a 'constructive engagement' with Pakistan look rather bleak.

While Track I talks should continue despite terror attacks as non-state actors involved will not like the peace process to gain any momentum. But the Bureaucratic engagements are generally marred by the unreal expectation generated by the media. So to have a balanced approach, India should engage Pakistan via both routes.

4 Post Pathankot dilemma

The Foreign Secretary level talks between India and Pakistan scheduled to be held on January 15, 2016 got postponed due to circumstances arising from the terrorist attack at Pathankot. Terrorism is best defined as an operational technique which involves the use or the threat of using violence to deliver a message to a wider target audience. The January 3 Pathankot attack on a base of the Western Air Command of the Indian Air Force, resulting in the deaths of seven security forces personnel and six attackers, is a classic example of terror acting as a spoiler for diplomatic initiatives. Both governments, building on the momentum gained during discussions at Paris, Bangkok and Islamabad, chose to behave with restraint in the immediate aftermath.

Many in India have welcomed the steps taken by the Sharif government over the Pathankot attack and the Indian government has also expressed satisfaction. Such contentment is, sadly, an acute case of historical amnesia. This charade has been played before. Pakistan has previously arrested India's most wanted terrorists—Hafiz Saeed and Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi—but has failed to marshal enough evidence to prosecute them in a court of law. However, the dialogue process cannot be held hostage by terrorists. An additional argument for continuing the peace process is that India needs to strengthen the civilian government vis-à-vis the army in Pakistan.

5 Blueprint for future engagements

Post Pathankot attack, the peace process is affected as Indian government is looking towards Pakistan to act on the terrorists groups there. In the meantime, it would behoove India to build on the positivity which has been apparent among the liberal sections of people within Pakistan since Modi's visit. A process which the government has taken great pains to re-start should be allowed to continue. Vested interests within Pakistan should not be allowed to gain satisfaction from the fact that talks have stalled again. It is perhaps a given that any impetus towards renewed dialogue results in attempts to disrupt such engagement. The kind of siege planned at Pathankot could only have been possible with preparations which would have been underway for quite a while, but perhaps the thawing of relations provided the immediate context in which the attack was conducted.

Resuming talks with Pakistan sooner rather than later is important at whatever level. These should now be part of a sustained effort of diplomatic outreach towards Pakistan rather than an on-and-off affair. While there may be differences on various national security issues within the political and military circles in Pakistan, there is general agreement on the perception that India is a primary threat. Even though newly inducted Prime Ministers make statements purported to show their eagerness to change the dynamics of India-Pakistan relations, they soon fall back to the norm.

Given the nature of things therefore, peace-building would need to be a slow process. Any attempt to hasten the pace of rapprochement suddenly can cause such initiatives to collapse. The dialogue process can be started by taking up issues under the Comprehensive Dialogue and charting out the schedule of talks to focus on what is doable. While issues related to terrorism are supposed to be handled by the National Security Advisers, the Foreign Secretaries could focus on Kashmir. Simultaneously, the schedule for meeting of the Commerce Secretaries could be fixed so that issues related to trade normalization can be taken up on a priority basis.

6 What Comprehensive dialogue can achieve in short term?

India Pakistan should plan the comprehensive dialogue in such way that less continuous issues are taken at first and a consensus is built on that. The momentum generated by this process can build the platform for taking big issues like Kashmir. We should see the India-China relation as a reference point for engaging Pakistan. In spite of the border issues, India and China are engaged in heavy trade activities which is beneficial for both countries. This should be the short term goal of the comprehensive dialogues.

Improving trade relations between India-Pakistan and it will lead high people to people contact which will lessen the trust deficit among people of both countries. Some less contentious issues like Sir Creek, Siachen and Wular Barrage can be taken and discussed in the peace process. Solving these issues will lay the ground for future engagement.

7 Conclusion

After looking at various aspects of India-Pakistan relations, one thing becomes clear that both countries cannot let non state actors dictate the bilateral engagement. Pathankot attacks are provides an acid test for India Pakistan relations. Indian government has shown restraint and not acted in knee jerk reaction and now Pakistan government should act against the perpetrator of the Pathankot attack so that trust is built again.

When the dialogue process is resumed, India should be prepared for any terrorist attacks that may take place despite talks. We should simultaneously plan a long-term strategy for deterring such attacks. If there was any such strategy in the past, it has obviously not worked. India should at the same time build leverages within Pakistan so that eventually those elements within the Pakistani establishment which encourage or are party to attempts at destabilizing India are forced to realize that India can respond in kind and that they will have to bear the costs of any such action.

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