

India-Pakistan in 2015: Filling the Trust Deficit?

By Dr. Sanchita Bhattacharya

The year 2015 ended with a “meeting” between the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan; a surprise stopover that took almost a decade to happen, and even when after it took place the event was still hard to comprehend. The visit by Narendra Modi to Lahore had happened while he was on his way back to India from Afghanistan, raising in turn, hopes for restarting the talks which had been in a limbo for some time. “Among the decisions taken was that ties between the two countries would be strengthened and also people-to-people contact would be strengthened so that an atmosphere can be created in which the peace process can move forward,” Pakistani Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said after what was dubbed as a hearty goodwill gesture in the otherwise shrewd diplomatic world. Modis’ Lahore visit came after India and Pakistan re-initiated high-level contacts with a brief conversation between Nawaz Sharif and Modi at the Climate Change talks in Paris in November, 2015. These could have been seen as a part of efforts to restart the peace process that has long been plagued by militant attacks and a profound sense of distrust.

Pathankot Setback

Unfortunately the so-called positive takeaways from the meeting got lost in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Indian Air Force (IAF) base on the dawn of January 2, 2016 in Pathankot (Punjab). The attack had been carried out by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) militants, backed by three Pakistani JeM handlers, Qasim Jaan, Ashfaq Ahmed and Hafiz Abdul Shakur (as the investigation suggests so far). The attack highlights that the age-old political quandary continues to affect the state of Pakistan and in a way that is reflected in the apparently incessant struggle for power between the political leaders and the armed forces.

Pakistan’s civilian government is seen to have very little influence over the military; relations with India are one of the subjects that the military considers too important to be left to the country’s civilian politicians. Pakistan’s Army Chief Raheel Sharif’s ‘unexpected’ (and ostensibly, self-invited) visit to the US in the month of November 2015, once again demonstrated the dominance of Army on political issues. Reports said Raheel Sharif attempted to bring to Washington’s notice India’s alleged machinations to destabilize Pakistan. However, the efforts did not yield much in Pakistan’s favour.

Recently, the attack at Pathankot air base looks more like a message from the people who are the effective controllers of the Pakistani foreign policy and who want to sound-out that no change in the long standoff with India will be allowed. Though Sharif had called his Indian counterpart following the attack and assured his “support” in the investigation, but India is well versed in the “trials and errors”

that Pakistan has been prone to committing; a fact that became even more evident when despite the provision of concrete evidence, the orchestration of the 26/11 (November 26, 2008) Mumbai (Maharashtra) trial from the Rawalpindi GHQ ensured that the case continues to drag its feet.

Indian Approach

The situation on the Indian side is also a lot different: India's reluctance to break off talks is evident. When Modi spoke to Sharif on January 5, he reiterated the demand that Pakistan act on the "actionable and specific information" supplied, but he stopped short of blaming the Pakistani state. It is equally telling that Sharif in turn praised the "maturity" of Indian statements.

Since Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister in May 2014, India has come to occupy the center-stage in the international order unlike in the recent past. The PM through a string of visits both within the immediate South Asia neighborhood and beyond generated significant diplomatic goodwill. This positive momentum was also applied by India to create conditions for talks with Pakistan many-a-time.

In first of such moves, Nawaz Sharif along with the other political heads of South Asia was invited for the swearing-in ceremony of Modi. Sharif accepted the invitation sparking hopes for the revival of the derailed peace talks. However, in August 2014, India found itself compelled to call-off the foreign secretary-level talks over the meeting of the Kashmiri separatists with the High Commissioner of Pakistan despite appeals against it, causing the relationship to falter yet again. Official engagements stood suspended and remained so for a long while.

Where the calling-off of the official exchanges was already a grave occurrence, what dealt a further blow to the India-Pakistan ties was the extreme criticism mounted by Pakistan against India for 'blocking the execution of a referendum in Kashmir'. Speaking at the UN General Assembly gathering in 2014, India and Pakistan traded jibes with the Indian side accusing Pakistan of being the "main source of terrorism". The situation somewhat remained unchanged as Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif met in Kathmandu (Nepal) in November, 2014 at the SAARC Summit where they did not, however, hold any bilateral meeting.

The second ray of hope emerged with the visit to Islamabad in March 2015 of the Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. Hoping to thaw the freeze in the ties, the main focus of the March 2015 was on bilateral issues: Jammu and Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek and water issues. Both sides confirmed that in order to find solutions for them, concerted efforts are required. The resumption of the dialogue process, maintaining the ceasefire (2003), the main mechanism for the stabilization of the situation on the Line of Control (LoC) and the Working boundary between the two countries were some of measures both sides were expected to take. Analysts in India had pointed out that while movement was better than stagnation, but these discussions had not brought much hope to

signal a qualitative breakthrough for the bilateral relations. At the same time, according to the Pakistani side, it opened the way for future negotiations.¹

External Cues

The Ufa Summit in Russia in July 2015 also brought a few positives in the bilateral ties. The dramatic outcome of Ufa was the meeting between Indian PM Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit. The meeting, though announced earlier, had a very unexpected, albeit positive, development in that Modi accepted the invitation to visit Pakistan in 2016 for the SAARC Summit. This was certainly a surprise given that the two South Asian neighbours had more cold moments than warm discussions through the year 2014. In fact, the five point joint statement issued in Ufa – unusual for its brevity and density of content – augured positively for what remained of the year 2015, with the proposed meeting between the Indian and Pakistani National Security Advisers hinting at the possibility of breathing new life into the troubled India-Pakistan ties. However, staggering the pace of what could have revived the derailed peace-talks, the meeting between the High Commissioner of Pakistan and the Hurriyat chief at the Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi sabotaged the process.

As the freeze in their ties was slowly setting, a "secret" meeting that took place between National Security Advisors (NSAs) of both India and Pakistan in Bangkok on December 6, 2015 reversed the process. In a joint press release announcing the meeting between Pakistan NSA Nasir Khan Janjua and Ajit Doval, Foreign Secretaries Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry and S. Jaishankar, and other officials, the Indian Foreign Ministry said the discussions which had taken place covered "peace and security, terrorism, Jammu and Kashmir, and other issues, including tranquility along the LoC."

Change of Tack

In an encouraging stance, Indian government's decision to resume dialogue with Pakistan was announced during Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to Islamabad on 8-9 December 2015 for the 'Heart of Asia' Conference. It was decided that India and Pakistan would hold discussions on wide-ranging issues under the rubric of a 'Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue' as opposed to the nomenclature of 'Composite Dialogue' or 'Resumed Dialogue' used earlier. According to the Joint Statement that emerged after the meetings in Islamabad, the two NSAs were to continue to address all issues connected to terrorism.

Pakistan gave assurances about the measures being taken to expedite the early conclusion of the trial of the culprits of the Mumbai terrorist attacks. It was agreed that the two countries would resume a Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue (CBD), with the Foreign Secretaries being assigned the task of working out the modalities and schedule of the meetings. It was also decided that the issues to be discussed would include Peace and Security, Confidence Building Measures, Jammu and Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation

Project, Economic and Commercial Cooperation, Counter-Terrorism, Narcotics Control, Humanitarian Issues, People-to-People exchanges and religious tourism. The fact that the two sides could pick the threads up was very good in itself, brightening further the prospects for reviving the stalled CBD. But, it is important to be cautious and examine at each step what will emerge from the talks in concrete terms. In this context, it is expected that the two most important issues under the scanner will be terrorism and Kashmir.

The meeting of NSAs in Bangkok and Swaraj's Islamabad visit were a part of Indian Government's decision to re-initiate the engagement with Pakistan that has suffered after the cancellation of Foreign Secretary talks in 2014 and NSA talks earlier in 2015.

Afghan Factor

The Afghan factor has always been a contentious issue between India and Pakistan. Pakistan's ultimate goal is that Afghanistan provides it the much-needed 'strategic depth' against a rising India. Where it has tried to exert its control on Afghanistan by meddling in its political affairs, however, of late Pakistan appears to have recognized that an instable Afghanistan in its backyard will serve it no purpose. In fact, the more debilitated its neighbor will be, the greater are the chances that its porous borders with Afghanistan will allow more miscreants to enter its territory and hamper peace within Pakistan.

Islamabad's inability to curb various militant proxies that it has nurtured over the years has already caused much trouble back home. Also, Pakistan has realized that it cannot just continue to nurture these radical elements given what they have begun doing in not only the hinterlands, but in the major towns and cities of the country. As Afghan Taliban seeks to shift its base out of Pakistan and with the Tehrik-e-Taliban having turned its back on Pakistan, the operational costs of cultivating these so-called strategic assets is increasing at a pace higher than the rate of return. In such a scenario, where the cost of supporting proxies is higher than the benefits, talking to India on traditional bilateral disputes, but also on Afghanistan has become a more yielding option. Little success can be made on resolving strictly bilateral disputes, without addressing Pakistan's concerns over Indian involvement in Afghanistan.

For nearly a quarter of a century, some form of dialogue with Pakistan has been pursued by various Indian governments, both officially and through informal back channels. There have been ups and downs but the underlying conviction has been that India should manage its relations with Pakistan so that Pakistan's hostility does not become an unwanted distraction. Since an all out conflict is ruled out, leverages to influence Pakistan's behaviour have to be found through dialogue and engagement so that suitable messages can be conveyed and understood. Linked to this realisation is the conviction that the more successful India is in managing this troubled relationship, the more diplomatic space it provides us for pursuing our relations with other countries in our neighbourhood

and beyond. Engaging in tit-for-tat antagonism and rhetoric with Pakistan diminishes India's standing and attracts unwelcome and unjustified suggestions of third parties who are often prone to raising the notion of a nuclear flashpoint. The focus on confidence building measures and communication links, particularly after 1998 (following the nuclear tests), was undertaken with this clear purpose in mind.

In 2016 one can hope that, India and Pakistan will move forward on some issues applying the win-win logic while keeping the channels of communication active on more ticklish issues where their present national interests are in conflict. In a democratic country like India while there is consensus on having normal and peaceful relations with Pakistan, there is also a strong sentiment that Pakistan's support to terrorism directed against India from its soil hinders the normalisation of relations. A dialogue should therefore be considered not as an outcome but only a process. While the process will take time to give way to a definite outcome, undertaking the process itself will expand the range of options available in our political tool-kit thereby increasing India's regional and geopolitical heft.

About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ For more information: <http://journal-neo.org/2015/05/25/rus-pakistan-indiya-status-otnoshenij-v-2015-godu/>