
India-Pakistan renewed talks: Prospects or Challenges?



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Executive Summary

The recently held National Security Adviser (NSA) talks between India and Pakistan in Bangkok reopened bilateral engagement between the two countries. This was followed by

Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's attendance at the "Heart Of Asia Conference" on Afghanistan in Pakistan. The conclusion of this reengagement was the announcement of upcoming Foreign Secretary level talks. The paper will examine the renewed dialogue process, and its immediate regional effects.

Background

India and Pakistan are set to renew bilateral talks after a hiatus of almost three years. The development signals a major step for peace in the South Asian region. The negotiations, termed the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, were announced by India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's prime-ministerial adviser on foreign affairs in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad (Iyengar, 2015). Swaraj was in Islamabad to attend the Heart of Asia Conference, the first visit of its kind an Indian minister since the new government came to power in 2014.

The frosty ties between the two South Asian powers, which have fought three wars: two over the disputed border region of Kashmir since their independence from Britain in 1947, has seen unsuccessful attempts at reconciliation by successive governments. Pakistan insists that any talks should include Kashmir, while India is focused on the cross-border

terrorism that it accuses Pakistan of fomenting.

Predictably the past year has seen the relationship deteriorate amid periodic border clashes, and a cancellation of the previous round of high-level talks. However, recently, the national security advisers of both countries met in Bangkok, soon after Prime Ministers Modi and Sharif spoke on the side-lines of the Paris Climate Conference in late November 2015 (Iyengar, 2015). This has raised hopes that despite the secrecy surrounding the NSA talks there appears to be a path to peace in the region.¹

¹ While writing this analysis another important development took place with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi making a surprise visit to Pakistan on 25th December 2015. This is a first visit of an Indian Prime Minister in 10 years. The details are yet to be disclosed and is an ongoing process.

Why the development?

An important aspect of this new camaraderie is the timing and the shift in the stated positions of the two countries when it came to holding talks; especially that of India's. India has maintained that any talks would have to be held without reference to Kashmir, while Pakistan considers Kashmir the core issue. So, then the question arises how did the shift happen? This is an important question because taking into consideration the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations indeed there is a shift in how both countries engage with each other. Unlike earlier times, both countries are willing to go ahead despite the status quo in relations. A few facts have to be cited to explain the shift. First, earlier in the year, 2015 the two countries met in Ufa, Russia and declared continuation of the talks which were cancelled when India tactically resisted knowing that without J&K, Pakistan would not budge while Pakistan held talks with the Kashmiri secessionist group Hurriyat Conference, which is a redline for India (Sasi, 2015). This failure to continue from the Ufa dialogue reflected poorly on both the countries when it came to mature and robust foreign policy and any new opportunity should clear that for both. Secondly, Sushma Swaraj had stated that no engagement should be held in

a third location other than the territories of the two countries involved. However, the NSA talks were held in Bangkok. Additionally, the talks were conducted in secret.

Finally, the inclusion of Jammu and Kashmir for discussion was astounding. This was a wide departure by India from its stated position that any inclusion of Kashmir is a no when it comes to holding talks with its neighbour (George,2015). The timing of these developments is a critical factor as well. One has to consider the changing global politics and the role of the United States in the dispensation. The Paris attacks and the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, are two events that have sent a strong message that western interventions in conflict areas are not acceptable and that using home-grown terrorists against these countries is how terrorism and wars will be fought on the global arena. Taking stock of the situation the western powers are looking to stabilise potential areas of discord that could go out of hand like it has in Syria. The India-Pakistan rift does not fall into category that of Syria where it can become a humanitarian crisis but has the potential to become a hotbed especially in the case of Afghanistan where Pakistan does not approve Indian presence at all. As

reports have informed that Daesh/ISIS is already making its way into Afghanistan (Mashal, 2015), a shift from Taliban era can be perceived which signifies more violence as seen in places under control of ISIS. A possibility that Pakistan will not support them to eradicate Indian presence there cannot be overlooked as well.

These developments also converges with the recent visit of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief Raheel Sharif to the U.S. Their joint statement has made clear that Pakistan remains a priority for the U.S., and any regional development in South Asia will result in the U.S. playing a pivotal role in stabilising Pakistan.

The “Heart Of Asia” conference needs to be mentioned to complete the analysis of the timing of the recent turnaround. The gathering is an annual event under the Istanbul Process which was initiated in 2011. The last one was at Beijing in October 2014.

The platform provides an agenda for regional cooperation in the 'Heart of Asia' by placing Afghanistan at its centre and engaging the 'Heart of Asia' countries for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, as well as a secure and prosperous region. The countries participating in the Istanbul

Process have decided on three elements for follow-up. The first issue identified for further discussion is political consultation involving Afghanistan and its near and extended neighbours. The second is a sustained approach to the implementation of the confidence building measures mentioned in the Istanbul Process document. Lastly, the conference agenda looks to contribute and bring greater coherence to the work of various regional processes and organisations particularly that relate to Afghanistan. 14 countries are designated as the core regional countries, including: China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Central African Region. In addition, 17 countries from the West and Japan form the support group and a host of regional organisations are also part of the process. (Heart Of Asia-Istanbul Process).

The conference is important because after having been the locus of instability and accused of increasing radicalisation, Pakistan held such an event. Moreover Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan have always been tense, especially since Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban in the country. This has pushed Afghanistan and India to harbour closer ties, an irritant for Pakistan. Therefore, this conference is a two-pronged strategy for Pakistan to salvage its

reputation, and to retain its position as an

important driver of peace in the region.

The theoretical aspect of India Pakistan Relations

Economic incentives may not deter states from engaging in conflict. This economic benefit aspect is apt for the South Asian region. The neo-liberal peace thesis explains the dynamics of relations between India and Pakistan. This paradigm states that even in the absence of peace making institutions relations can be sustained if concerned states believe that peace will be profitable (Jacob, 2007). In this case, both countries have realised the futility of estrangement, especially in the face of changing geopolitics. India's emergence as a major power has put it on the centre stage of politics

in South Asia. The democratic ethos of the country, economic resurgence and military capabilities have forged new political relations for India. For example, the Indo-U.S. and the Sino-India relations at present where India-US have signed a civil nuclear treaty while economic ties between India and China have become stronger; these were only a dream 20 years ago. Growing instability in Pakistan and its deteriorating image as the epicentre of terrorism puts it under pressure from these countries to change its tactics especially where it concerns India. Therefore, a rational step for either country is to engage with the other, despite the constraints.

Limitations of bilateral engagement

The bilateral engagement between India and Pakistan always comes with a caution. The chances for the peace process between the two contending nations have always been invariably dependent on certain conditions. These include; peace, no terror attacks, or any other incidents that could derail the process. On Pakistan's part, the biggest constraint has been the military, and the hard-line right wing lobby that adopt a hawkish stance

towards India. Despite many attempts at a composite dialogue, peace has eluded the region. A handful of people in both countries are aware as to what really happens behind the scenes of these undertakings. Inherent mistrust between the two countries has been an underlying factor throughout. For India, non-inclusion of Kashmir as an issue has been an impediment to reach a compromise with Pakistan. Therefore, any solution

or conflict resolution entails a sustained inclination for compromise. However, this is possible only when a well-defined plan has been reached.

Details of such an agreement are at present nascent, a condition that needs to be resolved swiftly.

Policy Recommendations for the immediate future

- India and Pakistan should continue engaging on a regular basis rather than depending on a sudden breakthrough even with all the impediments.
- As for outstanding issues such as; Kashmir, terrorism, Siachen Glacier and Sir Creek, each should be discussed individually depending on priority (even if the two countries' priority lists are at odds). This should lead to a change in the status quo.
- There should be no pre-conditions to the talks.
- Finally, a definite dialogue framework should be designed for continued engagement

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