

# India-Pakistan relations: Charting a course without reliable maps

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Wagah Border | Source: Koshy Koshy/Flickr

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Seven decades after partition, the landscape of India-Pakistan relations remains a wasteland. We have eaten a lot of bitterness. The interdependence stemming from shared history, the timber of our humanity, culture and language has eluded us. Indeed, the past in our relations ensnares us.

## Yawning trust deficit

What defines the relationship is a yawning trust deficit that is embedded in its entrails. The very fact of the existence of this trust deficit prevents substantive progress in achieving our dreams of a regionally integrated South Asia, a South Asian Commons. Transportation linkages, common markets, shared development and the movement of people are all elusive prospects in this scenario. Take the South Asian University in New Delhi, set up to build a culture of understanding and regional consciousness: it reportedly has no Pakistani students. It is unfortunate that this is so, for South Asia deserves to be interconnected and allowed to achieve a peaceful co-existence beyond cartographic national lines, for it is really an integer, meant to be an organic geopolitical and geo economic space devoid of blockage or blood-feuds and animosities.

## **Diplomacy with Pakistan is in many ways charting a course without reliable maps.**

Today, seventy years into our existence as independent nations, there seems no reasonably happy tomorrow in India-Pakistan relations. Dissonances of the past only repeat themselves. Emotional handshakes seem to vaporize in the atavism of distrust that constantly reasserts itself. I have written elsewhere that diplomacy with Pakistan is in many ways charting a course without reliable maps. The map always has a missing segment. Something like the map in last year's Star Wars movie, where the search for Luke Skywalker is held up because there is a critical segment missing. To us in India, that missing segment could be provided if Pakistan deals effectively to eliminate terrorism directed against India. For us, Yoda, the most powerful of the Jedi, was perhaps addressing Pakistan when he said, "If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will."

### **Terror as a convenient replacement of war**

For all of us in South Asia, the people's priorities are essentially development, security and good governance. I believe there is a very human desire for peace in both India and Pakistan. We occasionally sing a carol in the middle of a war, like the famous Christmas Truce of 1914 between German and Allied soldiers, when Prime Minister Modi visited his Pakistani counterpart in December 2015. Soon thereafter, we had Pathankot and the replay of how terrorism affects our relations. The attack in Uri in September 2016 only deepened an already gaping wound. It seems we are condemned to learn only what we have learnt before.

From the Indian side, insistence that Pakistan drops its support of terror groups operating from its soil, dominates the discourse. Pakistan has been unwilling to act on this, the reasoned conclusion being that it uses terror as an instrument of policy, as a tool that is a convenient replacement of war in trying to alter or revise the status quo. The government in New Delhi sees little advantage in pursuing a dialogue with Pakistan for normalization of relations in such a situation.

### **Always preparing for the worst**

When we do have dialogue with Pakistan, it has functioned only in fits and starts. Based on its experience with China, where India has built a relationship that has essentially stressed cooperation and common ground in areas like trade and people-to-people contact, while reserving differences over the border issue (even the recent tensions over Bhutan did not upset the basic structure of India-China relations) we have favoured in the past, a similar approach with Pakistan. But the latter's fixation about Kashmir and the Siachen Glacier has demonstrated that the example of what we have done with China, holds no political weight or the power of example, in Pakistan. Hence, both nations, India and Pakistan are always preparing for the worst, not for the better, in our relations. Even the grant of MFN by Pakistan to India, has become a bridge too far. Meanwhile, the show of aggressive goose stepping footwork at Wagah goes on.

India's profile in the world is very different from what it was two decades ago. Her emergence as a rising power, as an Asian giant, is a reality that needs no further confirmation. A small dip in GDP growth does not take away from this reality. India is a stable democracy, her global well-wishers are many, her diaspora add strength to its image, she is an attractive destination for foreign institutional investments, and her foreign policy has shed the shackles of non-alignment as greatly energized relations with the United States, and partners like Japan, the ASEAN and Australia have shown. India is a blue water naval presence in the Indian Ocean and is fast developing her strategic outreach in the region with greater economic and security resources as a counter to Chinese ambition.

The United States has long jettisoned its hyphenation of India with Pakistan. The decision of the George W. Bush administration to strategically invest in closer relations with India has been further enhanced in succeeding administrations. On the aspect of terrorism, a key concern for India when it comes to relations with Pakistan, the United States has been increasingly supportive and understanding.

## **Nationalistic opinion in India today favours a tenacious safeguarding of the national interest by the government.**

However, when it comes to relations with Pakistan, India is quite clear that normalization has to be a bilateral process with no scope for external mediation. Facilitation by countries like the United States, is quite different from and should not be confused with mediation. India is clear that problems in relations with Pakistan must be solved politically, diplomatically, and not through the force of arms, conventional and least of all, nuclear, unless Pakistan is determined to force such conflict on India in which case, her retaliation will be swift and fierce. “Wake, be thyself, scourge thy foes” was the teaching of Krishna in the Bhagawad Gita, the foundational Hindu scripture. Nationalistic opinion in India today favours a tenacious safeguarding of the national interest by the government.

## **Kashmir – a wounded civilisation**

India has not rescinded its willingness to resolve the issue of Kashmir through dialogue with Pakistan. But a solution cannot emerge unless a climate of trust and confidence is built in the relationship, the guns are silent on the line of control, and the threat of cross-border terror is removed. The present situation in the Kashmir Valley, is extremely unfortunate. I regard Kashmir as a wounded civilization. The recent events have only highlighted the need for dialogue between the government and the Kashmiris. The downturn in economic activity brought about by the disturbances causes difficulty to the ordinary people who are the losers in all this. But this does not mean that there is no constituency for peace among members of civil society – there still is such a constituency. People have responded positively to Prime Minister Modi’s message on Independence Day that Kashmiris need hugs and not abuse or bullets.

### **I regard Kashmir as a wounded civilization.**

The current mood of the Kashmiri people does not exist in isolation from the proxy war that continues to be fed by forces from across the LOC. The challenge before the government of India is while controlling and eliminating militancy in Kashmir, to stabilize the security situation, to reach out to the people and the youth particularly, and to initiate a political dialogue and outreach with a cross-section of the population. At the same time, let us not forget the plurality that constitutes the state of Jammu and Kashmir. While we focus on the situation in the Valley, do not forget the people of Jammu and Ladakh whose aspirations are differently expressed. This is a dialogue that has to be intra-state as much as it may be directed toward the agitated people in cities like Srinagar. As one observer once put it, “deploying monolithic communal parameters to understand the realities of Jammu and Kashmir is not only inappropriate but also yields a politically misleading analysis. Various communities living in different parts of the state (and also) across the dividing Line of Control have different political aspirations that must be addressed in order to arrive at a lasting peace.”

### **They should start with reuniting the people of both sides in Jammu and Kashmir across the Line of Control, permitting their free and easy travel, demilitarizing the region, and emphasizing trade and economic development.**

I do not believe that any Indian government can accept even the smallest likelihood of Kashmir’s secession from the Union. I know that in Pakistan, acceptance of the Line of Control as the international boundary is also unacceptable. And, the people of Kashmir do not want their State to be partitioned or their desire for self-rule or preservation of human rights denied. It was once said we need a compromise between all these points of view – a “balance of dissatisfaction”. If India and Pakistan are to sit down seriously and resolve this 70-year problem, they should start with reuniting the people of both sides in Jammu and Kashmir across the Line of Control, permitting their free and easy travel, demilitarizing the region, and emphasizing trade and economic development. These are ideas that are not new, but their validity remains. Maybe visionaries on both sides of our borders will pick up these threads again and not allow them to be swallowed by history.

**The writer is a former Foreign Secretary of India. This piece is based on remarks made recently at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. at a seminar/conference organized by Conciliation Resources.**

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NEXT STORY