

India-Pakistan Relations: The Prospects for Peace

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SRI RAMAN, MAR 18 2008

Will the twenty first century see a positive transformation of India-Pakistan relations? Over the past nine years, the question has elicited several optimistic answers. Alas, all but one of them are based on assumptions that are not only defective but downright dangerous.

Let us deal with these answers and assumptions before coming to the one and only common sense ground on which a cautiously hopeful conclusion on the question is warranted.

Ironically, it all began with both the countries acquiring the nuclear bomb in May 1998. Noises of belligerence, of course, emanated from both New Delhi and Islamabad immediately in the wake of the nuclear-weapon tests in India's Pokharan desert and Pakistan's Chagai hills. A top leader in the Indian government asked Pakistan to take note of "the change in the geopolitical situation" in South Asia. A lesser leader even dared Pakistan to "declare a war on us now". Their counterparts in Pakistan, too, let out a collective howl of joy after their own triumphal tests as though the country had just rebuffed an Indian aggression.

Then came the international sanctions against both the countries, and threats of more. That cut short the celebrations, accompanied by much machismo and muscle-flexing. Both New Delhi and Islamabad suddenly saw an imperative need to present a common front as "responsible nuclear-weapon states", a contradiction in terms that only members of the "nuclear club" had called themselves so far. By February 1999, then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was riding a bus to Lahore, the first in a road transport service introduced between the two countries in many years. His meeting with then prime Minister Nawaz Sharif led to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding envisaging "confidence-building measures" (CBMs) on the nuclear front.

This was the cue for security experts of both academic and bureaucratic kinds to come out with their optimistic prognosis of India-Pakistan relations based on their nuclear rivalry. Now that the neighbours had both acquired nukes, they argued, there won't even be a conventional war between them ever again. The assumption was absurd, of course, but had to be proved so in practice.

The Kargil conflict erupted in May 1999, and raged on until July. There is little doubt by now that it was a bomb-born confidence which pushed General Pervez Musharraf into a misadventure on the Himalayan heights (as most Pakistanis perceive it today). This "conventional war" threatened to turn nuclear, too.

The two adversaries traded nuclear threats freely during the war. But there is reason to believe that they also went further. The US administration under President Bill Clinton was reported later to have received intelligence that Pakistani nuclear warheads were being moved toward the border with India. According to a report of May 2000, India had responded by readying "at least five nuclear-tipped missiles".

The conflict ended, mercifully, without becoming a nuclear conflagration. It did so, it must be remembered, however, not because either side had shown any sense of responsibility or restraint. The region was to face a bigger threat in the Indian summer of 2002, when about a million troops of both the countries were locked in an "eye-ball to eye-ball confrontation" all along the border, particularly in Kashmir. There was no assurance at all from either side that the consequence would be confined to a "conventional war". According to a journalist who kept count, nuclear threats

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were exchanged between the two no less than 20 times during the period.

International pressure averted a nuclear disaster again. But neither side had learnt any lesson. An India-Pakistan “peace process” was launched with much fanfare in 2003, and has continued all these years, leading to resumption of rail and road transport as its most real gain. Notably, the process has not yielded an inch of advance towards meaningful nuclear CBMs, while the missile race between the nuclear-armed rivals has continued apace without any respite.

The Indian strategists and security analysts now talk as though it were an established truth that the most immoral of weapons are an instrument of peace. As for Pakistan, Mushahid Hussain Sayed, chairman of the Pakistan Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee (and associated with President Musharraf’s political camp), saw no possibility of an India-Pakistan war. “War is no longer an option because of the balance of terror that exists between the two countries since both countries went nuclear in 1998,” he said.

An additional ground for unwarranted optimism during the Vajpayee-Musharraf period was that, by political logic of an apparently perverse kind, nothing could be a better time for improvement of India-Pakistan relations. The argument may not have figured in any official document, but it was a repeated refrain in drawing room discussions and cocktail diplomacy. The far right ruled in New Delhi and military in Islamabad, and who else could initiate the peace exercise, without provoking fierce internal opposition? The question was supposed to be a rhetorical one, but it only showed non-recognition of a fundamental fact: no meaningful peace process, one that went beyond bus and train services, could be sustained by hawks with their basic constituencies of hate and militarism.

The synthetic optimism has ignored the seriously anti-peace role played by a politics of hate and militarism in both the countries. The military confrontation of 2002 in Kashmir was accompanied, it must be remembered, by the anti-minority pogrom in Gujarat, with Chief Minister Narendra Modi a sharply anti-Pakistan thrust. The peace process suffered, for another example, a serious jolt in India three years after its initiation because of the serial train blasts of Mumbai of July 2006. The hostility the peace moves encountered from self-proclaimed “jihadis” in Pakistan can hardly be overrated either.

Official optimists have, of late, found yet another argument. They saw disturbances in Pakistan, which finally led to a general election, as a positive development for India-Pakistan peace. “India is sitting pretty”, said a former Indian diplomat on a television show, “with the Pakistan army tied down in the tribal areas on its western border”. Similar views have been voiced by prominent Pakistani observers in recent days. In an amazing display of short-sightedness, peddlers of the theory forget that the growth of extremism in Pakistan cannot but pose a grave threat to India-Pakistan peace even in the medium run.

It will be yet another fallacious theory that expects an advance in the peace process to follow automatically the restoration of Pakistan’s democracy. Advocates of such a theory had pointed to the plea of Pakistan People’s Party leader Asif Ali Zardari on the back burner. Hopes on this count should be tempered by now, with Pakistan’s army chief Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani clarifying that the military stays committed to the cause of Kashmir.

As for democracy spelling a decline in extremism, Pakistan’s peace activist Pervez Hoodbhoy says: “Many choose to believe that the suicide bomber is a consequence of Pakistan’s acquiescence to being America’s junior partner in its war against terror. Conversely, there is a widespread opinion that suicide attacks will disappear if Pakistan dissociates itself from this war. But, few admit the brutal fact that even if America retreats or an elected government calls off the army, the terror of jihadism will remain.” And so will the “jihadi” threat to India-Pakistan peace, particularly in Kashmir.

The only concrete ground for optimism about India-Pakistan relations lies in the proven fact that the subcontinent also has a vast constituency for peace and partnership in development. True, neither New Delhi nor Islamabad has given the other side an inch on Kashmir. It is also true, however, that today neither can dare nor declare that it has given up the peace process.

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