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The Perilous Path of India-Pakistan Relations, Post-Pathankot

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MICHAEL KUGELMAN, JAN 26 2016

The history of India-Pakistan relations can best be described as yo-yo-like — marked by alternating periods of highs and lows. There have been plenty of wars, but also periods of warmth. Over the last few months, the yo-yo has seemingly been in constant motion, rising rapidly and falling furiously.

Anatomy of an Up-and-Down Bilateral Relationship

For much of 2015, the two countries bickered and blustered, issuing threats and hurling accusations. However, toward the end of the year, the relationship's mood abruptly changed. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the Paris climate change conference. Their national security advisers held a secret meeting in Thailand. At a regional security conference in Islamabad, the two countries agreed to resume the comprehensive bilateral dialogue process that had been suspended since the 2008 terrorist attacks in the Indian city of Mumbai, which were staged by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani terror group with close ties to Pakistani intelligence. Then, most dramatically of all, Modi made a surprise Christmas Day visit to Pakistan—the first trip to Pakistan by an Indian premier in 11 years.

And then came January 2.

On that day, terrorists attacked India's Pathankot air base, located not far from the Pakistan border. Seven Indian security forces lost their lives. India blamed Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), another Pakistani terror group with strong links to the Pakistani security establishment.

When it comes to India-Pakistan relations, diplomatic breakthroughs are often sabotaged by terrorist attacks or other provocations. In this sense, Pathankot was a case of déjà vu all over again.

Foreign Secretary-level talks, originally scheduled to occur on January 15, were postponed. New Delhi demanded that Islamabad take action against the Pathankot perpetrators, and insisted that dialogue would resume only if the Pakistanis did so. Pakistan did in fact take action — sort of. According to Pakistani authorities, several JeM-run schools were shut down—though the group's main facilities remained open. Additionally, JeM leader Masood Azhar was put in protective custody — a far cry from detention.

Pakistan's post-Pathankot actions against JeM may well amount to little more than subterfuge and window dressing. Still, they are an improvement from similar situations in the past — such as after the Mumbai attacks — when Pakistan's default response to Indian demands for action against Pakistan-based perpetrators has been knee-jerk denial. This may help explain, at least in part, why India has now signaled its desire to resume dialogue. On January 22, New Delhi announced that the Secretary-level talks would be rescheduled for some time after India's Republic Day festivities on January 26.

After a dizzying flurry of diplomacy and disaster in recent weeks, the dust has finally settled. It's time to take stock of what's next, post-Pathankot, for India-Pakistan relations.

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Talks Still in the Cards

The bottom line, underscored by India's announcement that the Secretary-level talks will soon be rescheduled, is that the comprehensive dialogue process is still alive. Modi would not have made that Christmas Day sojourn to Pakistan if he were not invested in talks, and if he were not willing to stomach the risks — such as Pathankot-like acts of sabotage — that invariably accompany them.

Modi has not divulged his exact motivations for extending an olive branch to Pakistan after months of tensions. It's worth recalling, however, that when he took office in 2014, one of his chief objectives was to improve ties with India's neighbors — including its most difficult one. Modi wants to strengthen India's role on the world stage, and this objective is easier to achieve without distractions in its backyard.

As for Pakistan, the calculus driving its support for dialogue is much simpler: it's all about Kashmir. Pakistan has never accepted that Kashmir (more specifically Jammu and Kashmir) should be controlled by India. It regards talks as a way to negotiate a new status for Kashmir. Historically, Pakistan has also favored a more nefarious means of effecting debate on Kashmir — the use of terrorist proxies like LeT and JeM to stage attacks in Kashmir and across India on the whole. Both of these groups wish to merge Kashmir with Pakistan through violent means.

Divergent Objectives and Expectations

Herein lies a fundamental conundrum: India and Pakistan may both want to talk, but their ultimate objectives are highly divergent and arguably irreconcilable.

India would want talks to bring about some semblance of rapprochement that would result in less Pakistan-orchestrated terrorism in India and more subcontinental stability, thereby giving India the opportunity to focus more on economic issues at home and on broader foreign policy goals abroad.

And yet Pakistan's military uses the idea of a hostile and even existential Indian threat to justify its outsized role in Pakistani politics and statecraft. Rapprochement, much less full-scale reconciliation, would therefore be highly undesirable for Pakistan's most powerful institution. Such considerations underscore an unsettling truth: even if Kashmir were to be miraculously resolved, India-Pakistan relations would likely continue to suffer — unless, that is, Pakistan's civilian leadership, which is more pro-India, were to wrest control of India policy away from the military. Such a prospect, however, is highly unlikely.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's ultimate objective in talks would be to address — and resolve — Kashmir. Though this contentious issue is an agenda point in the comprehensive dialogue, India has given little indication that it is willing to abandon its rigid, long-standing position: Kashmir has already been resolved, and has no need to be negotiated, much less discussed.

There is also a fundamental disconnect in expectations, and it risks jeopardizing even the most modest benefits that could result from dialogue. Consider this: there are ample issues on the comprehensive dialogue agenda that are easier to discuss than dicey topics like territorial issues and terrorism. These include trade, cultural exchanges, and water. The problem is that while India would regard progress on these issues as an achievement in and of itself, Pakistan would view it as a confidence-building springboard for meaningful discussions on renegotiating the status of Kashmir — to which India, at least for now, is allergic.

In other words, capitalizing on the low-lying fruit could set Pakistan up for disappointment — and lead to fresh provocations that set back bilateral relations anew.

All Eyes on India

India, by asking Pakistan to take action against the perpetrators of the Pathankot attack, effectively placed the ball in Pakistan's court. Yet all eyes should be on New Delhi. This is because there's little reason to believe Pakistan's basic

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position will change anytime soon: it will continue to push for dialogue for the sake of Kashmir, and it will continue to stage and sponsor provocations as a pressure tactic.

At some point in time, regardless of what may transpire over the next few weeks, India will need to make a fundamental decision. Should it continue dialogue simply for the sake of talking, and with the hope that something good can come of it? As Winston Churchill famously said, “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” Or, alternately, should it take an extended break from dialogue and focus on other matters? Some Indian analysts, as well as former government officials — and seemingly the current administration — have supported the first position. Others, however, have advocated strongly for the second position, arguing in particular that disengaging from dialogue can give India more space to address pressing matters like the economy and efforts to boost crisis-response and counterterrorism capacities.

For India, a big question is whether dialogue is good or bad for its national security. Though some Indians claim they fear China’s rise more than Pakistan’s instability, there is nonetheless great concern within India about anti-India terror groups in Pakistan and their ties to the Pakistani state, as well as about the country’s overall volatility. Some in India even fear (perhaps unnecessarily) that Pakistan could experience some form of state collapse. Several years ago, an Indian security analyst in New Delhi said to me: “We know that Pakistan will fall. We just don’t want it to bring us down with it when it does.”

The uncomfortable truth for India is that it will likely continue to suffer from Pakistan-based terror regardless of whether it talks to Pakistan. This reality won’t make its decision about whether to dialogue or not any easier to make.

Another uncomfortable truth, for both countries, is that a truly successful dialogue — one that culminates in some type of substantive agreement — would require each side to take bold steps that neither is likely to take. Pakistan would need to crack down hard on anti-India terrorist groups — arresting and prosecuting their leaders, shutting down their facilities, cutting off their funding sources, and severing all ties with them. India, meanwhile, would need to agree to revisit and negotiate the Kashmir issue.

Uncertain Times Ahead

In the coming days and weeks, the dialogue will likely resume — impelled as much by the motivations of each side as by outside pressure from Washington, which is consumed by the threat of Islamic State and doesn’t want tensions on the Subcontinent to escalate to anything beyond a distraction.

We can expect — barring another terror attack in India — that Secretary-level meetings will occur, with pledges to keep talking. Terrorism — and India’s repeated demand that Pakistan do more to combat it — will likely dominate the agenda. And we can hope — barring any obstructionist tactics from influential hardliners on both sides — that there will also be ongoing conversations, on track two or other behind-the-scenes levels, simply meant to keep the channels of communication open and to build new repositories of goodwill. A recent Takshashila Institute analysis wisely suggests that bilateral dialogue may be more useful if left to the diplomats, not to top politicians and officials.

Beyond the likelihood of the continuation of bilateral talks in the short term, the future is more uncertain. However, if history is any guide, it won’t be long before the relationship is confronted by fresh challenges and crises. The dialogue process could once again become a casualty.

After all, once it has ascended, the yo-yo of India-Pakistan relations is always poised to plummet.

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