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Strategic Insight

Proxy War to Proxy Peace

by [Surinder Rana](#)

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During his visit to Kashmir on 18 April 2003, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee made a new peace offer to Pakistan. Pakistan's Prime Minister Zaffarullah Khan Jamali responded to this offer by making a telephone call to Mr. Vajpayee on 20 April 2003, thereby setting in motion speculation on the possibility of high-level engagement between the two countries. During recent months, both sides have made positive moves toward a fresh rapprochement, including a set of India-centered confidence building measures undertaken by Pakistan, both countries restoring normal diplomatic ties, and also announcing restoration of air and land transportation links between the two countries. Furthermore, both sides have avoided indulging in heightened euphoria about an immediate start of bilateral dialogue, preferring a cautious and weighted approach with a better prospect of leading towards meaningful communication. Despite heightened expectations caused by the talk of talks between the two countries, the progress in that direction has been rather tardy. This *Strategic Insight* argues that Pakistan's political response to India's peace offer is a proxy response, and that the real stakeholders in Pakistan are still undecided on final contours of the Pakistan-India relationship.

Underlying Reasons for the New Peace Initiative

A realization apparently has dawned in India that the violence in Kashmir cannot go on forever, and that the people of Kashmir need respite from this bloody orgy. Recent economic and political initiatives taken by the new provincial government of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) have created welcome opportunities for people to come out and express themselves openly. Before going to war against Iraq, the United States had asked both India and Pakistan to restrain their mutual belligerence, because it could become inconvenient during the U.S. military campaign in the Persian Gulf. Compliance with the U.S. request manifested in a lessening of militant-related violence in Kashmir; this change also indicated a readiness on the part of Pakistan's leaders to play ball when the United States asks it to do so. [\[1\]](#) Indian leaders also believe that Pakistan is finding it difficult to convince the international community that the ongoing terrorism in Kashmir is any different from terrorism in Afghanistan, or anywhere else in the world.

Pakistan has traditionally based its case for Kashmir on the UN Security Council resolutions of 1948. Recent U.S. unilateral action on Iraq, however—and the resultant dilution of U.N. authority—send a clear message to Pakistan about the limitations of its attempted multilateralist approach to the Kashmir issue. During his latest visit to the sub-continent, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage announced that the United States would leave it to India and Pakistan to sort out their disputes themselves, thereby indicating Washington's preference for a bilateral framework for peace between the two adversaries.

South Asia watchers, along with the people of South Asia themselves, have been surprised by the suddenness of events over recent weeks. The two rivals, India and Pakistan, had seen their relations reach an all-time low after the 13 December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. The threat of another India-Pakistan war did diminish in October 2002, when India withdrew its military from the border,

and Pakistan later followed suit. Both countries refused to resume any dialogue, however; India made further talks conditional on Pakistan's taking steps to end the cross-border terrorism it was accused of sponsoring in Kashmir, a charge Pakistan hotly denies. Indian attempts to shun talks with Pakistan over the issue of cross-border infiltration, however, are becoming less productive, hence pragmatism apparently led India to seek renewed engagement with Pakistan.

Possibilities for Success

The success of the newest India-Pakistan peace initiative depends upon their finding supporters on either side with the desire and ability to move it along. Pakistan's India policy, particularly on subjects related to Kashmir, is the exclusive prerogative of the Pakistani military rather than the foreign ministry.^[2] Since 1990, Pakistan's Kashmir policy has been based on two elements: one, overt political and moral support to the Kashmiri population at the same time that Pakistan calls for a struggle for self-determination against the "Indian yoke"; and two, covert military, economic, and logistical support to Kashmiri militants in an apparent effort to coerce India into an agreement on Kashmir as per Pakistan's terms. Indian leaders call this policy Pakistan's "proxy war against India," in which Pakistan-based militant organizations are doing Islamabad's bidding in Kashmir and also in other parts of India. Through this two-part strategy Pakistan has partially succeeded in forcing India to commit a large chunk of its military to combating the ongoing insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir.

Such coercion, however, has caused more harm so far to Pakistan than it has to India. Owing to their dependence on non-state actors (i.e., Islamist militants) for achieving national objectives (political control of Kashmir), Pakistan's leaders found themselves in a difficult situation when, in the aftermath of 9/11, they were faced with Washington's ultimatum, "Either you are with us or against us." President Musharraf's decision to join the U.S.-led global coalition against terrorism has caused domestic fissures in Pakistani politics and society. Most major countries at one time or another have urged Pakistan to put an end to cross-border terrorism against India, a significant indication that Pakistan's support of such activities is both widely recognized and abhorred. The proxy war has therefore failed to yield a desirable outcome for Pakistan. Given that the Pakistani military continues to control foreign policy vis-à-vis India, the latest peace initiative by President Musharraf represents a shift in Pakistan's India policy from "proxy war" to "proxy peace." This means that Pakistan's political establishment will now do the bidding of the Pakistani army. India has made a resumption of the bilateral dialogue conditional to a total end of proxy war, but so far, Pakistan has not shown a serious inclination to address Indian concerns. Under these circumstances, what are India and Pakistan's expectations from this renewed effort at reaching peace?

India has cautiously welcomed Pakistan's signals that it is reigning in militant organizations in Kashmir, but it maintains that there is no measurable drop in infiltration levels.^[3] India expects more to be done to make the atmosphere conducive for a sustained dialogue. While Islamabad is happy on the restoration of Lahore bus link, it demands restoration of rail links as well. New Delhi for its part says Pakistan is unnecessarily dragging its feet in granting over-flight rights, and that resumption of rail traffic is dependent on the progress of talks. Although Pakistan has hinted about giving most-favored-nation status to India for bilateral trade, so far there has been no official statement to that effect. On the diplomatic front, high commissioners of both countries have assumed charge in each other's capital, thereby restoring full diplomatic relations. However, visas between the countries continues to remain restricted. ^[4]

Mutual Suspicions

Perceptions of the conflict between India and Pakistan vary. According to Pakistani leaders, Kashmir is the core issue, and until Kashmiris are given their right of self-determination through a UN-sponsored plebiscite, the likelihood of peace between India and Pakistan will remain remote. India believes that Pakistani elites including its Pakistani military leadership, and Islamist religious radicals do not consider peace with India in their interests. Some Indian policymakers believe that the removal of a perceived Indian military threat will negate any legitimate reason Pakistan's military may have for playing a major role in Pakistani politics. If this were true, officers would be unlikely therefore to support, and might actively interfere with, any real progress toward normalizing relations. Peace with India will compel

Pakistani religious rightists to co-exist with their moderate and comparatively progressive Indian Muslim counterparts, thereby limiting the radicals' hold over Pakistani society.

Conflict, it becomes apparent, is inherent in Pakistan's India policy. Indians believe that Kashmir is only one manifestation of this conflict, and not necessarily a core issue, as Pakistan's government claims. Against this background of endemic hostility, the two sides have entered various rounds of bilateral dialogue over the last 56 years. Indian leaders, therefore, are wary of Pakistan's previous record on implementing bilateral agreements. In light of the fact that successive Pakistani governments have insisted on third-party mediation in the Kashmir conflict, Indians have come to believe that if they agree to another bilateral dialogue, Pakistan's elites would likely manipulate their political leaders into making the process fail, thus "proving" to the international community that bilateral dialogue is unproductive, and justifying their quest for outside mediation.

Road Blocks

For there to be any meaningful outcome to new India-Pakistan talks, the minimum requirement will be to re-establish mutual faith between the two opponents. India's leaders need to define their Pakistan policy, and articulate a vision of what kind of Pakistan they would like to see in their neighborhood. It is widely recognized that the menace of terrorism has affected Pakistan as it does India. The forces that are inimical to India are also active against Pakistan. Religious radicalism, that includes sympathy for and active collaboration with terrorists in certain parts of Pakistan, is not an entirely new phenomenon. It is part of a trend to which successive Pakistani governments have contributed, and which the current Pakistani administration will not be able suddenly to end.

If India wants an end to terrorism coming from Pakistan, one way is to engage Islamabad in India's fight against terrorism. Positive acknowledgment by the Indian government of the actions taken by Pakistan, combined with an institutionalized mechanism to verify each other's claims, will likely help more moderate elements in Pakistan's government win domestic support for reconciliation with India. Indian leaders have damaged their own credibility by attributing almost every incident of violence in India to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, cynically employing the Pakistan bogey to cover lapses of the Indian security apparatus. By blocking Pakistan's entry into international organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forums (ARF) and the Commonwealth Group, the Indian bureaucracy might claim small diplomatic victories, but in the overall battle for regional peace these successes are inconsequential. [5]

The above argument nevertheless does not aim to absolve Pakistan of its involvement in terrorism against India. Despite Islamabad's claims to the contrary, Pakistan continues to be a hotbed for India-centric terrorism. [6] In its report on global terrorism in 2002, the U.S. government acknowledged that extremist violence in Kashmir, fueled by infiltration from Pakistan across the Line of Control, threatens to become a flashpoint for a wider India-Pakistan conflict. [7] According to the U.S. Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, "Terrorism emanating from Pakistan (against India) is not over. Global terrorism will not end until cross-border terrorism against India ends permanently," [8] The Pakistani government's insistence on calling the Kashmiri insurgency a "freedom movement" has very few buyers outside Pakistan. In fact, the Pakistani intelligence agency bungled by overindulging in operations with foreign mercenaries, so that large sections of the Kashmiri public have become increasingly alienated from the radical Kashmiri movement. [9]

Current assessments of public opinion in J&K indicate that, even if some Kashmiris feel some resentment against the Indian government, they would opt for an independent Kashmir rather than joining Pakistan. The "healing touch" policy of the current J&K government has succeeded in pacifying dissent within the state, thereby also reducing militancy. Certain recent counter-terrorist measures in J&K have forced militants onto the defensive. Consequent to growing frustration among their ranks, the militants began to target civilians and the family members of security forces personnel, but succeeded only in attracting domestic and international opprobrium. [10] As some media reports suggest, the situation is fast returning to 1997-98 levels, the period before the Kargil conflict during which militancy had reached almost its lowest levels since fighting began in 1989. [11] The current trend of growing normalcy in the J&K, and the

Pakistani government's failure to win international support on the theme of the Kashmiri freedom movement, should further help Pakistani leaders see good reason for bringing permanent changes to Pakistan's India policy.

The domestic political situation in Pakistan, which is characterized by an impasse over whether President Musharraf should continue as the Army chief, is another apparent factor in Islamabad's move toward reconciliation with India. Musharraf's government is under increasing international pressure to improve human rights and democracy, while domestic pressure is building for Musharraf himself to give up his leadership of the military and focus on being the head of state, thereby ending his own conundrum of irreconcilable loyalties. To do so, however, he needs a stronger political base. A breakthrough in talks with India while Musharraf is head of state will likely strengthen Pakistan's political establishment and raise the president's political stock. To achieve that outcome, Musharraf will need to restrain his soldierly instincts by avoiding talk of future Kargils and nuclear war in the sub-continent.[\[12\]](#)

The U.S. Role

During their recent visits to South Asia, various U.S. officials have conveyed to both India and Pakistan that the United States has no preferred solutions for pending disputes between the two neighbors. Both sides will need to work bilaterally toward regional peace. Washington therefore has welcomed the new peace initiatives offered by the political leaders of India and Pakistan. Whether as part of an ongoing war against terrorism, or due to growing regional security imperatives, U.S. engagement in South Asia nevertheless is likely to continue for some time. Continuation of violence, whether in the name of the so-called freedom movement or alleged terrorism, is the biggest cause of instability in the South Asia region. While both India and Pakistan acknowledge that pending issues between them can be resolved only through dialogue, a commitment by both sides to end violence is not only a pre-condition but a pre-requisite for meaningful talks. People are the best arbiters of interstate disputes, and for the people's will to prevail, democracy and respect for human rights are the best recipes. U.S. engagement should therefore encourage strengthening of democracy and human rights institutions in South Asia. To this end, the United States should link further economic aid for Pakistan to a discernible march towards true democracy. Years of war through proxy have only yielded death and deprivation for a large section of South Asia's population. Now, when both India and Pakistan are talking of peace, let that peace be an outcome of people's yearning for a better life, and not merely another kind of proxy by which some military leaders and religious radicals can hold onto power.

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