

Winds of Peace in South Asia: Are They Real?

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From an international perspective, another meeting of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders will invariably pass as a non-event. However, the 4-6 January SAARC summit is significant because of its venue, Islamabad, where Indian and Pakistani heads of state will meet after an intense phase of mutual hostility. The latest round of India-Pakistan reconciliation started on 23 November 2003, when Pakistani Prime Minister Mir Zaffarullah Khan Jamali announced a unilateral ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir and expressed his willingness to accept a series of bilateral confidence building measures (CBMs), several of which had earlier been suggested by India.^[1] The CBMs included starting a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffrabad, a ferry service between Mumbai and Karachi, the revival of air links, and re-opening a previously existing rail route linking Khokhrapar (in Rajasthan, India) and Munnabao (in Sindh, Pakistan).^[2] With India's acceptance, the guns fell silent across the LoC on 25 November for the first time in two decades. At several outposts along the LoC, Indian and Pakistani soldiers celebrated the Islamic festival of Id by exchanging sweets instead of targeting each other with shells.

It is premature to say that the new India-Pakistan rapprochement will lead to lasting peace in the region. The current improvement in Indo-Pakistani relations is caused by a combination of outside pressure and domestic compulsions. The current ceasefire is a tactical reprieve, which will last through the SAARC summit. A likely outcome of this rapprochement would be a managed level of India-Pakistan hostility and increased political and economic interaction.

Contributing Factors

The Vajpayee peace initiative is guided by the logic that the military will continue to play the dominant role in the existing political power structure in Pakistan. Hence, delaying engagement with the existing regime is imprudent. Vajpayee's broad political backing gives him sufficient domestic support to negotiate difficult issues with difficult neighbors—witness the success of the comprehensive dialogue between India and China. Having failed in earlier attempts to negotiate peace with Pakistan, New Delhi has adopted a new strategy relying on positive unilateral initiatives, which can be reciprocated quickly by Pakistan.^[3] Such an approach circumvents lengthy negotiations that can be scuttled by hardliners in either capital, and instead provides diplomatic options to maintain forward momentum in reducing Indo-Pakistani hostility.

The Pakistani government's initially guarded response to Vajpayee's CBM proposals and later announcement of a unilateral ceasefire surprised everyone. A leading Indian daily assessed that Pakistan's abrupt turnaround could be interpreted in three ways. Cynically, it could be argued that Pakistan has little to lose and much to gain by adopting such a posture during this part of the year, when adverse weather conditions restrict its ability to assist militants in Kashmir. Jamali's overture thus aims to win international support while simultaneously putting India on the defensive. Upcoming elections in India may limit New Delhi's ability to offer concessions, allowing Pakistan to claim that any breakdown in the process is the result of Indian obduracy.^[4]

Another possibility is that this sudden change represents a dramatic shift in Pakistan's India policy. This possibility is supported by the recent crackdown on Pakistan-based extremist outfits: Islamabad banned six organizations, sealed their offices, froze their assets, and briefly detained their supporters. President Pervez Musharraf's call for joint ventures between Indian and Pakistani entrepreneurs also suggests a genuine change in attitude. His stated willingness to set "aside" the UN resolutions on Kashmir may indicate a more flexible negotiating stance.[\[5\]](#)

The third possibility is that this is a tactical pause. Pakistan faces external pressure to cease support to extremist groups, and such support has generated instability within Pakistan. This line of argument notes diminishing results from supporting insurgency in Kashmir. Pakistan has not abandoned its strategic commitment to proxy war to achieve Kashmiri self-determination, a goal that is closely tied to Pakistan's self-image. Instead, the external and internal pressures have forced moderation to give Pakistan breathing space.[\[6\]](#)

According to skeptics this tactical adjustment is attributable to international pressure and the evolving political and security situation in Kashmir. The recent U.S. \$3 billion aid package, announced during Musharraf's September 2003 visit to Camp David, is linked to results on terrorism and socio-political changes in Pakistan. Islamabad has had difficulty in de-linking the Kashmir dispute from the broader global war on terror. Pakistan is under constant international pressure to do more to curb extremists operating from its territory. During her October 2003 visit to New Delhi, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice was emphatic: "it is absolutely the case that the infrastructure of terrorism has to be dismantled. It is absolutely the case that everybody needs to do more and Pakistan needs to do more to make sure that there cannot be terrorist acts taken in—from Pakistan or from Kashmir against targets there and we frequently talk to Pakistan about that."[\[7\]](#) The degree of policy change suggests external causes, as Pakistani activist Asma Jehangir observes:

We are supposed to believe that the recent developments in India and Pakistan relations have come about without any external pressure, that a deep sense of anguish for the poor of the subcontinent has moved the leaders to give peace and friendship another chance. Suddenly Pakistan's custodians of nuclear weapons are willing to bury the 'baby' with their own hands and if India follows suit, all for the sake of 'peace.' Even ideologues are threatening to lead peace marches to Wagah. Such complete and sudden change of heart is only viewed in Indian and Pakistan films.[\[8\]](#)

During the last few months the political and security situation in Kashmir has changed. The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), the secessionist conglomerate in Jammu and Kashmir, split on 7 September 2003. The mainstream APHC faction led by Maulavi Abbas Ansari favors talks with Delhi, while the Pakistan-supported faction led by Syed Ali Shah Geelani shuns talks. The Kashmiri populace welcomes the Indian government's offer of talks with the APHC. If talks do occur, Pakistan fears being sidelined. The security situation in Kashmir is returning to normal. A record number of tourists visited Jammu and Kashmir this summer, with Srinagar even hosting an August conference of chief ministers, presided over by the Indian Prime Minister. There was a perceptible decline in terrorist incidents last summer, which the state government attributed to rising public apathy towards militants and an effective counter-insurgency campaign. Indian military authorities reiterate that infiltration continues despite the cease-fire. However, the Indian army claims that enhanced surveillance and effective counter-insurgency measures have produced major successes against infiltrators.[\[9\]](#) The fencing along the LoC, which is only partially completed, also increases the difficulty of cross-LoC infiltration.

A recent Washington, D.C.-based NGO study on Kashmir revealed that women in Kashmir regard the Kashmir crisis in terms of economic livelihood and employment rather than political democracy. Survey results indicated an abhorrence of violence and a preference for an end to the "gun culture" in Kashmiri society.[\[10\]](#) Intelligence inputs from Srinagar also suggest growing skepticism of Pakistani credibility by Kashmiri militants, following Pakistan's about-turn against the Taliban in 2001. All of these factors complicate Pakistan's strategy of using the freedom movement in Kashmir to foment trouble for India.

The regional cooperative effort under the aegis of SAARC is another factor for the new peace initiative. Initiated in 1985 as an effort to promote regional economic cooperation, SAARC has been marred by bilateral confrontation between India and Pakistan. While the SAARC Charter specifically excludes "bilateral and contentious issues" from deliberations, Islamabad has used SAARC as a forum for such issues, impeding progress on economic cooperation. India declined to participate in the last SAARC summit scheduled in Islamabad in January 2003, causing its postponement. Pakistan wants the upcoming January 2004 summit to succeed. Also, despite their commonality of interests in the trade-related issues at the World Trade Organization (WTO), bilateral discord has long-term costs for both India and Pakistan. Each realizes the utility of progress on trade-related issues in SAARC to provide coherence to their arguments at the WTO.

Prospects

On 15 August 2003, people from both countries gathered in a rare gesture at the international border and celebrated each others' independence days. A two-and-a-half-year-old Pakistani girl, Noor Fatima, whose successful heart operation symbolized peace efforts between India and Pakistan, came to India on July 11 with her parents on the Lahore-Delhi bus service that was resumed after an 18-month suspension. Noor's case generated goodwill among the Indian populace and her story reverberated in the media on both sides of the border. A regular flow of similar cases is now coming from Pakistan to India for medical treatment. Parliamentary and business delegations have visited each others' capitals. Will this positive momentum be enough for peace?

The ceasefire along the LoC should help restore a semblance of normalcy to the local populace, who suffer under incessant artillery duels. The ceasefire is more helpful for the people on the Pakistani side of the LoC because Kashmiri villagers living close to the LoC on the Pakistani side utilize arable land right up to the LoC, while land ahead of the army defenses on the Indian side is not cultivated. In addition, the civilian population of the Pakistani-held Neelum Valley will benefit from the ceasefire with the resumption of the normal traffic on the Neelum Valley road. India's interdiction of this road was one of the reasons for Pakistan's 1999 Kargil intrusion. The ceasefire creates a constituency for its continuation. If it lasts for any period of time, people will get used to normal life. Any disruption would likely cause public resentment. Also, with the two-way flow of people in Kashmir through the proposed Srinagar-Muzaffrabad bus, people on both sides will be able to see the ground realities, which are definitely different from the official propaganda they are used to hearing.

The flip side is that the proposed CBMs are reversible without major consequences. Neither side has any stakes involved in implementing the proposed CBMs. Either side could stop the bus service, train, or ferry on any pretext. CBMs as part of a long-term process are more workable. For example, the resumption of normal trade and business investment would greatly raise the costs of a breakdown in relations. Absence of such commitment makes the current CBMs suspect from the very beginning.

The current peace process is based upon an apparent belief of both governments that cooperation is better than confrontation. On 1 January 2004, Musharraf won legislative approval for his presidency. This provides him added legitimacy and political acceptance to negotiate with India on all crucial issues.^[11] Repeated Indian peace offers cannot be brushed aside as mere political rhetoric. Various analysts have cited domestic political obstacles in India to meaningful dialogue with Pakistan. The recent political upturn in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) fortunes despite Vajpayee's peace efforts with Pakistan undermine this line of thinking. Tensions astride the LoC have always remained part of Pakistan's strategy to keep the Kashmir issue alive. As a retired Indian army officer remarked, "It is not in Pakistan's interest to let the LoC become quiet and peaceful. They don't want the LoC to be dormant. They think that a dead issue would not form the basis of a solution. Therefore, they keep it on the boil so that it remains in newspaper headlines."^[12] Earlier Indian and Pakistani efforts for tranquility along the LoC failed in the absence of mutual trust, partially because of Indian skepticism. This time the ceasefire has materialized because of Pakistan's offer. The current ceasefire is open-ended, with no time limits attached. The ceasefire will help Pakistan in negating Indian allegations that the Pakistan army provides covering fire for cross-LoC infiltration.

Leaders of India and Pakistan have agreed to hold a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the SAARC summit. While no dramatic outcomes are expected, this bilateral exchange will likely re-start a dialogue that has been dormant for over two years. From the Pakistani perspective the issue is Kashmir; and from the Indian perspective it is Pakistan's compulsive hostility towards India, one manifestation of which is continuing cross-LoC infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir. If terrorist violence continues in Jammu and Kashmir, India will find it hard to talk peace. If Pakistan fears that engagement with India is unrelated to Kashmir, it will not sustain the process.

According to Stephen P. Cohen of the Brookings Institution, the peace effort is not likely to go very far because sooner or later something will disrupt the relationship: "It is still fragile. It could be a terrorist attack. It could be some insult that somebody issues to the other side and I think that the dialogue is at a very tenuous phase. So, I would assume that the dialogue would collapse as the previous dialogues have."^[13] The International Crisis Group (ICG), a European think tank, argues that despite the latest CBMs between India and Pakistan, the potential for yet another Kashmir crisis that could result in armed conflict looms, since mutual distrust and hostility remain high, and both countries' substantive positions are rigid.^[14] Such predictions are based upon the failures of past India-Pakistan peace initiatives. However, this time the outcome could be different because the peace moves are supported by a broad spectrum of the Pakistani establishment. Unlike in the past, the Pakistani business community feels confident in its ability to compete with its Indian counterparts. In addition, the recent electoral success of the BJP at the state level could result in holding early general elections in India. The possibility of Vajpayee getting another term as prime minister looks stronger. A rejuvenated BJP under Vajpayee will have more political maneuvering space than any other recent governing coalition. Moreover, the United States, in its ongoing war against terrorism, has a greater stake in peace in South Asia than in the past. The current process of reconciliation is partially an outcome of U.S. engagement in the region. A deliberate scuttling of the process by either party would have obvious consequences for its relations with the United States.

Imperatives

Caution and boldness are competing imperatives. Too much caution on part of either party could be misconstrued as political timidity, while excessive aggressiveness by one might lead to unnecessary caution by the other. One reason the 2001 Agra summit failed was inadequate groundwork prior to the summit. The leaders of both countries should discuss a broad framework for resumption of dialogue during the forthcoming meeting. However, substantive dialogue should start only after adequate preparation.

South Asian leaders are prone to expressing opinion even when there is no need to express it. It is important that both sides' leaders exercise restraint in their statements to the public. Stephen Cohen's fear is real when he says that one terrorist attack or insulting remark from either side could disrupt the entire peace process. Any complacency on the part of the security forces could be fatal. The existing lines of communication ought to be kept open and functional so that any misunderstanding is urgently clarified.

Lasting peace in the region has many hurdles in the way. A strong desire on the part of the leaders on both sides could lead to a situation of managed conflict. Popular mistrust of the other side restricts options, but increasing people-to-people interaction across the border and the LoC should serve to minimize such fears. Traditional transportation routes, such as between Jammu and Sialkot, should be considered for re-opening. India and Pakistan should promote interaction between scholars, academics, and other key segments of civil society on either side of the LoC in Kashmir. Official procedures and red tape should not be allowed to unnecessarily hinder the process. Officials need to be counseled to refrain from scoring political points. The media has its own stakes in covering such events. At the same time, authorities on both sides are required to make appropriate arrangements for coverage.

The U.S. Role

CCC analyst [Feroz Hassan Khan](#) has argued that the deterrence equation in South Asia now implicitly depends on U.S. intervention. In essence, Indian and Pakistani nuclear policies create what might be called the "independence-dependence paradox." India and Pakistan have attempted to wean themselves from outside support by acquiring nuclear weapons. But this strategy paradoxically makes them more dependent on American intervention to avert war.^[15] Although both countries deny any outside pressure for the current phase of the peace process, the initiative is not entirely domestic.

A recent study by the Council for Foreign Relations and the Asia Society suggested that the United States should facilitate the creation of an environment in which India and Pakistan can find peace.^[16] Recent U.S. policy towards South Asia has emphasized crisis management, most notably during the 1999 Kargil Conflict and the 2001-2002 India-Pakistan military face-off. Such a reactive approach is inadequate given the inherent danger that an India-Pakistan crisis will one day spiral into a broader conflict, conceivably one involving use of nuclear weapons. U.S. diplomacy needs to be more forward leaning in South Asia, a shift that appears already to be underway, as evident in the continuous contact of U.S. policymakers with senior Indian and Pakistani officials.

It is widely believed that as long as the United States is still involved in Afghanistan and hunting Al-Qaeda, Washington will not lean too hard on Pakistan. Such thinking is short-sighted. A pro-active U.S. policy ought to engage existing ground realities. First, radicals within Pakistan, whether fighting in the name of Kashmir or Afghanistan, are more harmful to Pakistan than they are to India. Recent assassination attempts against President Musharraf make this clear. Second, cross-border terrorism in Kashmir is a serious issue with India. At the same time, the Indian security apparatus has dealt with this problem with a fair degree of success. For Pakistan, continuing its support to cross-border terrorism amounts to reinforcing failure at a heavy cost. Third, Pakistan's influence over Kashmir's domestic politics is declining, consequently diluting prospects for Pakistani success through its avowed solution of the Kashmir issue by plebiscite. Fourth, India continues to outpace Pakistan in political, economic, and military terms. An emerging U.S.-India strategic understanding is mutually beneficial for the United States, India, and South Asia as a whole. A strong, politically and economically stable Pakistan is in everyone's interest, including India's.

Going forward, the following steps should be taken:

- The U.S. government should encourage President Musharraf to address Indian concerns about cross-border terrorism.
- Despite the predominant role played by the military in Pakistan, the people of India and Pakistan and not their militaries should be the real arbiters of peace between the two countries. The U.S. initiative should encourage democracy and greater people-to-people interaction between the two countries. All economic, trade, and technology cooperation initiatives by the United States should be made contingent on successful democratization.
- India should draw down security forces in Jammu and Kashmir as militancy declines.
- Both countries should maintain the momentum of the current peace process and initiate a comprehensive bilateral dialogue.

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