

## Can India and Pakistan Seize the Moment?

Two months after Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's offer to extend "the hand of friendship" to neighboring Pakistan, the two countries are exchanging ambassadors and have begun restoring transport links, but discussions on their underlying dispute have yet to take shape. The next few months provide a crucial opportunity to begin a serious peace effort. Should this window of time pass by without progress, however, internal politics in both countries may rule out another try for a year or two.

**Why initiate peace talks now?** Multiple factors are motivating Vajpayee's call for peace talks. For a year and a half following the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, India had maintained a policy of isolating Pakistan and hinting at preemptive military action, but this had not produced results. After more than 50 years of public service, Vajpayee has long sought to leave behind a legacy of peace with Pakistan. He has said that the current effort will be his third and last; at 78, he has hinted that he may retire if this one fails. More pragmatic reasons include the international environment. Vajpayee may have wanted to make a move before U.S. pressure appeared to force his hand in the aftermath of the Iraq war. He may also have seen the Srinagar initiative as a way to reassure the Muslim community in India, where some viewed the war in Iraq as an assault on Islam.



The initiative fits nicely into India's political calendar. India faces four important state elections later this year. National elections must follow by October 2004 at the latest. They could be earlier, especially if the governing BJP party does well at the state level. If the initiative succeeds, Vajpayee and the BJP will be able to campaign as statesmen; if it fails, as many in the BJP expect, India will be able to claim the moral high ground in shifting to a more hard-line policy.

**Pakistan's response.** The Pakistan government welcomed Vajpayee's overture. Within three weeks, both India and Pakistan agreed to send ambassadors back to each other's capitals and to restore transportation links. A visit by the U.S. deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, was the backdrop for a statement made by President Pervez Musharraf that activity by militant groups across the Line of Control had stopped, and any remaining training camps would be immediately dismantled. In mid-May, the Pakistan government also reissued orders banning militant groups and restricted the movements of their leaders. A personal phone call from Pakistan's prime minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali to Vajpayee, including an invitation to visit Pakistan, made clear that Pakistan was trying to present a positive response.

Pakistan had been pressing for resumed India-Pakistan contacts during the year and a half of frozen relations. Nonetheless, Pakistan's unsettled internal politics will affect its ability to sustain the effort. Jamali, who became prime minister after the October 2002 elections, has had the lead in presenting Pakistan's response. This was an adroit move, sidestepping India's deep suspicion of Musharraf.

More importantly, as the India-Pakistan moves began, Pakistan's opposition parties' bitter protest over a series of constitutional amendments Musharraf had instituted by decree before the 2002 elections was reaching a climax. The sticking point was the opposition's unwillingness to allow Musharraf to remain both head of the army and president. At the same time, the government of the Northwest Frontier Province, run by an alliance of religious parties, passed a series of strict new Islamic regulations, to the evident unhappiness of the central government. Both these developments challenge Musharraf's authority, and have led to speculation that he might respond by dismissing the national and provincial parliaments. In any event, this situation makes it more difficult for Musharraf to continue a serious crackdown against the Islamic militants, still an essential condition for any serious progress in peace discussions. Already, hard-line commentators are pushing the view that Pakistan need not be too generous in responding to India's moves because India is desperate for a peace initiative. This mindset has led Pakistani strategic thinkers into dangerous brinkmanship with India in the past.



**A hopeful beginning.** The two countries have exchanged parliamentary delegations. Concrete preparations are under way for resumed transportation links, with bus service set to resume in late July. The restoration of air links has been delayed by disagreement over India's desire to regain overflight rights to Afghanistan at the same time, but both sides have opened technical-level talks. The new ambassadors are set to take up their posts in early July. Both sides have released prisoners as a goodwill gesture, and have exchanged suggestions for confidence-building measures. Pakistan is seriously considering India's long-standing request for Most Favored Nation status in bilateral trade, which India in principle extended to Pakistan some years ago. India and Pakistan will also send teams to compete in a Sri Lanka-hosted tournament between the three countries in mid-August. All this seems to be an effort to create an atmosphere conducive to resolving the tough problems between these nuclear-armed neighbors.

**...but no talks yet.** What has not yet happened, however, is any serious move toward talks. One reason for this is India's

dissatisfaction with progress toward stopping armed militants moving across the Line of Control, which separates Indians and Pakistanis in Kashmir. Press and other reporting suggests that infiltration is down, but violence inside Indian-administered Kashmir has remained high. Musharraf's decision to restrict the activities of militant leaders is a step in the right direction, especially because India is now focusing more on the "infrastructure of terrorism" than on infiltration itself. But without continued decisive action by Pakistan, it is hard to imagine talks getting anywhere even if they begin. On the other hand, the longer the delay before some form of contact is resumed, the more likely it is that activity across the line will pick up again, even without the Pakistani government's support.

**The "road map" for peace.** India has traditionally preferred to start discussions with the least contentious issues, whereas Pakistan's biggest concern is that the most difficult issue of all—Kashmir—not be marginalized. The most likely formula for reconciling these divergent views is the kind of arrangement India and Pakistan have used on several previous occasions, with several working groups that address simultaneously the issues of greatest concern to both sides. Similarly, both sides expect that discussions will progress gradually, with meetings between lower-ranking officials leading eventually to a summit.

Three other challenges are receiving less attention. The first is how to get started. The standard opening move, a meeting between the two countries' foreign secretaries, may not be the most promising. Given the unusually high level of acrimony between the two countries, it might be wise for them to work through less visible diplomatic or back channels for an extended period, so as to pre-arrange a successful first meeting away from the glare of public view.

A second and more difficult challenge is what to say during initial discussions on Kashmir. Although they agree that Kashmir needs to be part of the process from the start, India and Pakistan start with completely incompatible positions. How, then, does one structure the agenda for an initial meeting? One way would be for both countries to agree on a very general common statement of purpose, one that acknowledges that there is a dispute over Kashmir, but also recognizes that terrorism is an unacceptable way to resolve it. Another useful tactic would be to develop a menu of gestures that both sides could make to improve the situation for Kashmiris and hence improve the atmosphere. Each side would make such gestures not as a favor to the other side, but as a way of continuing a process that each side believes will benefit itself.

The third key feature of successful talks is building a fundamentally new relationship between India and Pakistan. One part of this complex task would be to develop mutually beneficial economic ties. The two countries could start by combining India's desire to open up their lamentably small bilateral trade with Pakistan's interest in a gas pipeline from Central Asia or Iran through Pakistan to the rapidly growing North Indian market. With a little imagination, the two countries could structure an agreement that would mitigate India's political risk in importing a strategic commodity through Pakistani territory. The payoff in peace and security for both countries could be enormous.

**The Kashmiri factor.** One thing that distinguishes the current opportunity for peace from other recent efforts is the impact of the 2002 state elections in the Indian-held parts of Kashmir. Despite election violence that claimed over 700 lives—including nearly 100 political workers and 2 candidates—over 40 percent of registered voters participated. And although the separatists declined to participate, the voters did oust the previous state government from power and bring a legitimate change of leadership to the state.

The Popular Democratic Party's (PDP) Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, leading a coalition government with the Congress Party, campaigned on a "healing touch" policy to bring social change to the region. His government made some early moves to release political prisoners, abolished the Special Operations Group police force (notorious for abuse of individual rights), and formed the Jammu and Kashmir Voluntary Force to bring accountability to policing in the region. It was less successful in opening communications with the separatists, and the government in New Delhi has put the brakes on some of its efforts to lighten the hand of security policy within Kashmir.

The election represents both an asset and a challenge to India and Pakistan in their quest for peace. On the plus side, it allowed Kashmiris to express their own voice. The government they elected has made clear its preference for peaceful means and a peaceful outcome. On the other hand, this challenges the Indian government to allow the state government to pursue its intended policies, and to embrace rather than resist a program of expanded autonomy. The early record is quite mixed. For Pakistan, the challenge is to allow the Kashmiris' dialogue with New Delhi to succeed—or fail—on its own, without acting as a spoiler.

**The U.S. role.** The Bush administration has welcomed these moves toward peace and is clearly encouraging them in its diplomacy with both India and Pakistan. For the moment, the United States is unlikely to take on a higher-profile role. Peacemaking is only one of several U.S. objectives in South Asia. In the just-concluded visit by Pakistani president Musharraf, India-Pakistan peace issues apparently received less emphasis than anti-terrorism operations within Pakistan. Similarly, the early June visit by India's deputy prime minister L.K. Advani focused first on the emerging strategic relationship with India.

These issues are important and deserve the attention that the Bush administration is giving them. But the opportunity to change India-Pakistan relations may be a fleeting one, and it deserves the strongest possible U.S. support. Within a few months, India will be caught up in election campaigns at the national and state levels, and Pakistan may have given in to discouragement and allowed the militants to resume their activities in Kashmir. The prospect of a long series of South Asian war scares is dangerous not only for South Asians but also for the United States. This may be the last chance for some time to change that prognosis.

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