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India and Pakistan: Prospects for Peace

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SYNOPSIS

*Overtures from both India and Pakistan raise the prospect of a fresh effort to find common ground. Is the time opportune for a peace deal? **RAJESH BASRUR** addresses this question through a systematic analysis.*

COMMENTARY

Much of the attention given to South Asia's strategic politics in recent years has been focused on the Himalayan confrontation between India and China. But there is growing interest in the possibility of an India-Pakistan détente, perhaps even a resolution of the intractable rivalry. The two states have a long history of conflict dating from the violent partition that tore them asunder in 1947 with repeated wars, recurrent crises, and persistent tensions over the disputed region of Kashmir. However, recent developments have raised the prospect of a breakthrough in India-Pakistan relations, with leaders on both sides expressing the hope of steering their troubled relationship in a new direction.

What are the chances of a rapprochement? Intractable rivalries *have* sometimes been resolved. Notable instances include the prolonged Franco-German tussle over Alsace-Lorraine, which spanned the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and two world wars, and, on a global scale, the Cold War. The latter was a particularly surprising reversal of what, even until the mid-1980s, was widely perceived as a conflict likely to stretch indefinitely into the future. In the aftermath of the sudden end of the Cold War, the eminent historian John Lewis Gaddis castigated the discipline of international relations for failing to anticipate it. The problem lay not so much in the discipline as in the failure

of its practitioners to ask the right questions. Keeping Gaddis's homily in mind, we might use a systematic analysis to try to gauge the prospects for an India-Pakistan understanding.



The disputed region of Kashmir has been a persistent source of conflict between India and Pakistan. Yet, recent developments suggest new prospects for peace. *Image from Unsplash.*

Material Sources of Change

In the view of materialist analysts like Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, the Cold War ended because Soviet leaders, aware that their moribund state was unable to compete with the United States in both economic and military terms, threw in the towel. In like manner, the economic and military gap between India and Pakistan appears to be widening. The Indian economy has been called a “bright spot” in the global system, whereas Pakistan is struggling in the grip of debt and seeking international succour from friendly state donors as well as the International Monetary Fund. The gap is wide: [India's GDP stands at US\\$1.3 trillion, compared to Pakistan's US\\$348.2 billion](#). The same applies to [annual military expenditure](#): India's current military spending of US\$54.2 billion dwarfs Pakistan's US\$7.5 billion. Their two political systems reveal a similar asymmetry in terms of stability. Indian politics exhibits a strong populism that is relatively stable (though leaning towards majoritarianism and illiberal democracy, which are sources of weakness if they persist). In contrast, Pakistan is a “hybrid democracy” characterised by a dominant military and unstable civilian governments periodically buffeted by religious extremism and terrorist violence.

But the material gap has its limits and it is unlikely that the Pakistani state will disintegrate. Past prognostications of its impending collapse have repeatedly been proved wrong. The military and the civil administration keep it going, while the international community, fearing the collapse of a nuclear power threatened by terrorist groups, has a strong stake in Pakistan's stability. In this respect, it is unlikely that South Asia's cold war will evaporate quickly like the Cold War, which really ended rapidly only because one of its chief contestants disintegrated. For India-Pakistan antagonism to dissipate, a different dynamic has to come into play.

Ideational Drivers of Conflict and the Possibility of Change

The usually identified source of deep antipathy between the two South Asian neighbours is identity. As numerous analysts note, the Kashmir conflict represents a clash of identities at heart. The partition of undivided India at the time of independence in 1947 was broadly carried out on the basis of religion, with compact Muslim-majority areas breaking away to create the new state of Pakistan, while the rest, including tens of millions of Muslims, remained in India. For India's leaders, their state was the political overlay of a fundamentally secular, multi-religious society. For Pakistan, the state was a political organisation that represented the aspirations of the region's Muslims. The Kashmir conflict came to symbolise this difference in identity conceptions. Both claimed ownership of this Muslim-majority region—whose Hindu ruler had acceded to India—as essentially underpinning their respective identities.

Can such a deep-rooted identity problem be resolved? Certainly; Alsace-Lorraine is a good example. The territory changed hands between France and Germany several times because of war, finally ending up with France in 1945. War may have been the deciding factor then, but, more importantly, the territory ceased to be a bone of contention between the two over time. In South Asia, a compromise without war is not impossible. Back in the mid-2000s, India's Manmohan Singh and Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf came close to a breakthrough when they agreed to loosen the Line of Control, which officially divides the Indian and Pakistani-held portions of Kashmir, and permit the freer movement of people and goods from one side to the other. In short, identity is not something written in stone.

A second ideational factor that can come into play is the emergence of new ways of thinking about old relationships. The Singh-Musharraf attempt to build bridges resembled the more radical approach adopted by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan. Gorbachev initiated "new thinking" and the broader "restructuring" (*perestroika*) that, applied to both the international and domestic dimensions, produced a dramatic revision of Russia's world view. Driven similarly by new thinking, the United States responded with alacrity. US policymakers had begun to realise that continuing the arms race with a declining Russia was an unnecessary economic burden at a time when the United States was facing economic competition from Japan and the Asian "Tigers", which had been free riding successfully on Washington's Cold War accommodation of its allies. For Singh and Musharraf, the cost issue was both political and economic. Military crises in 1999 and 2001–2002 brought home the high risk that nuclear-armed states face when they engage in military confrontation. Both knew that a military solution was out of the question. In addition, a combative relationship could seriously inhibit foreign investment. Thinking of this kind still applies today. Neither side wants to be too close to the military precipice. And for all its economic advantages, India cannot afford to risk antagonising investors, as it has discovered with the crisis in the Adani conglomerate's fortunes.

Leadership and Domestic Politics

A critically important factor that led to the ending of the Cold War was the role of the two men at the helm. Both Gorbachev and Reagan were charismatic leaders whose innovative mindsets allowed them to step out on a political limb and essay a

conceptual leap into unknown territory. Both wanted to rearrange the basic framework of their nations' relationship along more relaxed lines and came close to doing so at the Reykjavik summit in 1986 till the process ran aground on the sandbar of missile defence. In South Asia, Narendra Modi, a strong personality, made an early effort to build bridges with Pakistan as well as other neighbours. Imran Khan on more than one occasion seemed to reciprocate. His successor, Shehbaz Sharif, has called for negotiations as well. So the prospects for cutting, or at least gradually loosening, the Gordian knot are not inconsiderable.

The key factor that determines the potential for leaders to succeed in pursuing transformative foreign policy changes is domestic politics. On the Indian side, Modi is an unchallenged leader who, other things apart, should be able to stave off nationalist criticism, especially since he has obtained a firm grip on the nationalism card. Yet, he too must tread carefully to avoid a crescendo of domestic opposition, so a breakthrough can only be achieved through a step-by-step effort. On the other side, the tripolar turmoil in Pakistani politics involving the two rival political leaders, Khan and Sharif, and the military is problematic. Each of the three parties has historically faced stiff internal opposition and accusations of betrayal when attempting a peace deal with India. A fourth element—the religious right—stands in the background, watched closely by violent extremist groups who are ever-ready to exploit the opportunity and shape the situation to their advantage.

The current situation, then, is not one that offers much room for optimism. India is in a somewhat stronger position to attempt a transformation in the relationship because it has a strong and stable leadership, but it will do so only if Pakistan agrees to rein in jihadi groups bent on attacking Indian targets. In contrast, the leadership in Islamabad is splintered and its components are not in a position to make concessions that could place them out on a limb. Eventually, it is the nature of domestic politics rather than differences in power distribution or identity that will be the deciding factor for peace between both countries. And therein lies the rub.

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