

Summer Thaw in India-Pakistan Freeze?

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May 13, 2010

Formal peace talks between India and Pakistan have largely been on hold since the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, but two upcoming meetings are scheduled to try to put talks back on track. Indian political analyst Radha Kumar of the independent Delhi Policy Group says a June meeting between Indian and Pakistani home ministers will decide if formal talks in July between the foreign ministers of the two countries will make any progress. If the June meeting results in discussing cooperation on terrorist issues and a briefing by Pakistan on efforts in trying the suspects in the Mumbai attacks, the July talks will be more productive, Kumar says. She stresses the need for restarting talks on Kashmir, which she says is "critical to any permanent peace" between the nuclear-armed neighbors.

What should we expect from the talks in July and what's going to be on the agenda?

Before that [meeting] all eyes will be fixed on the home ministers' meeting in Islamabad in June. This meeting should give an indication of how much can be expected of the July meeting. If the Indian home minister is, for example, briefed on progress in the trials of the Mumbai accused, and there are positive discussions on closer cooperation against terrorism, then we can expect more substantive talks in July.

The Pakistani government has said they will table the water issue at the July meeting. Hopefully the focus will be on management and conservation rather than on dispute and arbitration. Some Pakistani leaders have suggested abrogating the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, which would be a great loss since it has existed for sixty years and proved its utility in arbitrating the dispute over building the Baglihar Dam in Indian Jammu and Kashmir.

Is there hope that India and Pakistan can move on from the tit-for-tat aggressive posture that has defined their relationship since 1947?

India and Pakistan have very vulgar polities. The language the politicians use, both in India and Pakistan, in relation to each other, is brutal, vulgar, and ugly. Their actions are not necessarily brutal and ugly, [but] the rhetoric they use clouds our ability to judge their actions.

From 2008-2009, the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has tried very deliberately to move away from a tit-for-tat linguistic or rhetorical response to what is considered to be provocative statements from across the border. But opposition politicians have not moved away, so the Indian parliament has remained as vulgar as ever in its debates on Pakistan. And naturally, in Pakistan, it's the ugly rhetoric that will be picked up, not the unassuming moderation of Prime Minister Singh. I've long wondered whether our two countries tend to resort to this muscle-flexing rhetoric because they feel so powerless in relation not only to their own destinies, but to the wider world.

Do you sense an intention in both polities to work toward a lasting peace?

The intentions of the Indian and Pakistani establishments are always difficult to judge. It's an odd thing in South Asia--political will is very amorphous. What is equally well-known, however, is that the bulk of the populations on both sides want peace between their two countries. Vote after vote, election after election, has shown us that the public will is there.

The high-political will is more difficult. I was quite impressed to see in retrospect the positive remarks President Asif Ali Zardari made in the early days of 2009. [Zardari said he did not consider India a military threat (*Telegraph*) and advocated strong ties with the country.] It was unfortunately a serious mistake on India's part not to respond immediately, even though it's understandable that there was some skepticism, given that the military was not pro-President Zardari, and the prime minister himself quite often contradicted what President Zardari said. Still, it was a very big mistake. And now there appears to be some options available, in terms of Prime Ministers Gilani and Singh. Whether it has Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani's backing, we don't know yet.

Do you see an international or a U.S. role in trying to broker peace?

If the U.S. were able to get General Kayani to make some positive remarks about peacemaking between India and Pakistan, the whole dynamic would change straight away.

I was rather pleased that the Indian government in the [former prime minister Atal Behari] Vajpayee period shifted from this very defensive hostility to any international role, to suggesting facilitation. For Pakistan, the international role has been a critical priority. So Indians should find ways in which it can be accommodated without a risk to themselves. And I shouldn't underestimate the risk factor. This problem with post-colonial societies is endless--the polity, the public, the media, the opposition will always accuse you of abasing yourself to foreign masters. Any politician in India has to be frightfully careful, and that's one reason why you hear all this muscle-flexing rhetoric, which is ridiculous. For the international community, it's also very important for them not to seek to claim credit for any facilitation.

In the event of another terrorist attack in India which is traced back to Pakistan-based militants, will the Indian government be hard-pressed to exercise the kind of restraint we saw after the Mumbai attacks in November 2008?

Many people have argued that the Mumbai attacks of 2008 created a sense of such frustration and helplessness within India, that if there is another Mumbai, India will have no option but to respond militarily. Within India, however, those who would argue that point would argue for a conventional military response, not for a nuclear response. When they say a conventional military response, they are not factoring in that Pakistan then might push it to the nuclear stage. But I feel fairly convinced that as far as the prime minister of India is concerned, or the leading decision-makers are concerned, that's one of the fears that would restrain even a military response. My own preference would be for Pakistanis not to say, "What would you do the next time this happens?" and to add, as they often do, "and we know it will happen," but for them to say, "What can we do to see that it doesn't happen again?"

And how real are fears of a nuclear confrontation in such an event?

When it comes to the question of nuclear confrontation, it's an interesting but little-mentioned fact that the Indian government has tended traditionally, right from the days of testing its first nuclear weapons in 1974, to see nuclear weapons as symbolic deterrents--not as actual offensive weapons. And there was a huge complacency within the Indian establishment that Pakistan's nuclearization would not lead to a real military confrontation. Some of that complacency was exploded in 2002, when India massed its troops on the Pakistani border in response to an attack on the Indian Parliament, and Pakistan responded in fact by arming some of its tanks with nuclear weapons and moving

them to its border. But even then, the point didn't sink home in India, that the level of Pakistani alarm at Indian muscle-flexing is one that can go very rapidly from rhetoric to nuclear. Even today, there is possibly not a sufficient recognition in India of that will. That makes for a very dangerous situation.

Is instability in Pakistan a threat to Indian stability?

All instability in Pakistan is a threat to stability in India. A stable and prosperous Pakistan would be a great bulwark for stability in India. However, the more unstable Pakistan gets, the greater the chances of a spillover of instability into India. And that has been quite significantly noted in this decade. Pakistan has increasingly grown unstable; India has increasingly had more and more Hindu-Muslim polarization, and also an exponential rise of terrorist attacks.

How important is Kashmir to the resolution of the India-Pakistan dispute as well as to achieving peace in that region?

Kashmir is absolutely critical to any permanent peace between India and Pakistan. Pakistan is not wrong when they call it the "core dispute." India is not wrong either when they link it to the partition, and say that for Kashmir to be resolved, Pakistan will have to get over the hostility it has felt toward India since the partition. Those two are symbiotically linked.

There are mixed messages on Kashmir. The back channel between India and Pakistan continues, but there is no clarity on whether it will pick up where it was left off [during the time of former Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf]. This is a pity because the Kashmir peace process was abruptly broken off in 2007 [due to political crisis in Pakistan], and if left to fester too long violence could creep back again. In all the previous peacemaking roadmaps, there was an understanding that the Kashmir dispute and the problem of terrorism were interlinked, though different. Progress on the two tracks was supposed to be parallel but in tandem, and when that did happen, as between 2004-2006, a solution was in sight. We have to hope that this framework can be revived.

Do you agree with some analysts in Washington, who argue that a resolution to the Kashmir dispute is critical to achieving stability in Afghanistan?

Analytically, that seems to be putting the cart before the horse. A Kashmir resolution is unlikely because of the spiraling rivalry in Afghanistan between India and Pakistan. If we want a Kashmir resolution, Kashmir has to be separated from Afghanistan and dealt with on its own terms. The spin effect would be helpful to Afghanistan, but for Afghanistan the focus has to be on Afghan reconciliation and

Afghan strategic drivers. In fact, the United States has been very wise to take that point on board and to separately try to encourage India and Pakistan to make their own bilateral peace, while also trying to engage with India and Pakistan in Afghanistan.