

8. Prospects of Multi-Track Diplomacy in India-Pakistan Relations

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India and Pakistan, the two nuclear armed neighbours, marked the 76th anniversary of their independence from British rule last August. Four wars, nuclear weapons, border issues and the relentless hostility of the two neighbours over the issue of Kashmir has added to the strategic challenge for New Delhi and Islamabad. Amidst these challenging times, there have been some moments of hope between the two nuclear neighbours.

Over these tumultuous and strained periods of bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan, a diverse set of civil society groups worked in the background to establish long-lasting peace, cooperation and reconciliation. At the government level too, repeated efforts have been made to improve the bilateral relations including back-channel diplomacy.¹ India, keeping with its Neighbourhood First Policy seeks normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan and is committed to address any issues bilaterally and peacefully, keeping with the Shimla Agreement and Lahore Declaration.² But these efforts are often overshadowed, and hostility takes over whenever India and Pakistan hit a bump in the bilateral relationship. It is due to this complicated nature of the relationship that the power corridors in New Delhi and Islamabad mostly choose to over emphasize on hard power to defend their respective national security. It is in such times that an alternative tool of diplomacy is sought to resolve issues and narrow down chances of war hysteria. When there is securitization of diplomacy, multi-track diplomacy (MTD) has the effect of opening doors of dialogue by invoking soft power, peace and culture. The purpose of MTD is not to undermine the importance of official political negotiations, but only to provide an alternative route that could supplement those negotiations.

Joseph Nye defined soft power as the ability of nations to obtain ends through the means of attraction rather than coercion or payments which arise due to the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies.³ Culture has since evolved as one of the most important components of soft power. In contemporary times, it is not coercive diplomacy that is appreciated by people around the world, but the cultural linkages of a country that are gaining more influence. The shared history, culture and geography of India and Pakistan can play a vital role in normalizing the relationship if the governments of both countries decide to make some policy shifts, and focus on introducing MTD as one of the tools of confidence building measures. This paper explores the utility of multitrack diplomacy and examines possibilities and challenges of this approach in peace building between India and Pakistan.

Efficacy of Multi-track Diplomacy

Multi-track diplomacy allows for 'a complex web of approaches, roles, strategies and activities employed by diverse actors at different stages of conflict development, conflict resolution and post-conflict peace-building'.⁴ It focuses on 'a plurality of approaches and actors' beyond the clique of diplomats and politicians, based on the assumption that 'there are several unique ways to help conflictants find common ground and citizens can use their own "vocation and location"

within a society to promote peace and security'.⁵ In the case of India and Pakistan, given the complicated nature of relations, the plurality of approaches and actors is exactly what is needed in building peace. This approach effectively keeps channels of communication open when official diplomatic relations plummet. The efficacy and significance of MTD in fostering peace beyond the realm of the state, has regained interest among security analysts and experts to study this approach and its role in India-Pakistan relations. The importance of moving beyond isolated political negotiations to include multilayered actors is to break down biases and prejudices that have been built and sustained over a number of years. One such effort to bring peace was the Shimla agreement of 1972⁶ that basically laid out the principles which would govern the future of bilateral relations between the two countries and ensued steps which were to be taken in order to ensure the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan are also members of international organizations and groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that seek to provide a platform for countries to resolve issues and conflicts through dialogue and communication. The eight-member SAARC is the only important regional institution where both India and Pakistan are members. "Largely viewed as a 'failure' in promoting regional cooperation, the inability to make progress is, in turn, attributed to the unending hostility between India and Pakistan".⁷ But inter-governmental initiatives tend to take a backseat whenever there is escalation of conflict on the border followed by strained relations. There is lots of hope from the SCO since it is a China-led organization. In addition to being a platform where the rivalry between New Delhi and Islamabad continues, the SCO also provides opportunities for the development of relations between the two countries from time to time. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's visit to India to attend the SCO in May 2023 is also important in this respect.

Thus, at times when track one diplomacy faces its own unique problems, the significance of multitrack diplomacy becomes imperative because a peace deal or a joint statement signed by the leaders of the two countries might be inadequate, or rejected by Indians and Pakistanis in an environment of animosity.

Peace and multitrack experts⁸ have argued that MTD has played a vital role in stable and continuous interaction between the states, ensuring communications even during periods of crisis and has also aided in finding common positive-sum solutions for both sides. These initiatives are great measures to alleviate misconceptions about each other. The civil societies of India and Pakistan play an elaborate role in the process of establishing peace and good relations between the two countries, however, there is a need at the government level to encourage and recognize these initiatives.

India and Pakistan have never ceased to talk about peace. Successive Indian prime ministers and generations of leaders in India, and often in Pakistan, have sought to resolve disputes, reconcile differences and establish durable peace. For, beyond the rhetoric, there is an acute awareness that no country's destiny is immune from its relationships with neighbours".⁹ As India's former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, once rightly pointed out that "we can change our friends but not our neighbours". Beyond the state, at the people-to-people level there is a desire for peace and reconciliation and a natural affinity to connect on the basis of a

shared history and culture. Therefore, in the course of time, numerous civil society-led initiatives have emerged for promoting peace and friendship between India and Pakistan.

The process of multi-track diplomacy between the two nations first started in the 1990's with "Neemrana dialogue" at the Neemrana fort of Rajasthan in 1990.¹⁰ It was majorly an interaction between the former diplomats, military personnel, journalists, NGO workers and academics from India and Pakistan with an official backing from respective foreign ministers. In the wake of declining relations post-terrorist attacks and subsequent surgical strikes, the dialogue was revived in 2018, led by former diplomat Vivek Katju on the Indian side, while the Pakistani side included former minister Javed Jabbar, among others.

Initiatives like Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD) has achieved progress in opening Rajasthan rail links, easing visa regimes, releasing fishermen from prisons, intervening in water treaty issues, encouraging cultural and sporting exchanges, facilitating multiple visits of people from all walks of life and initiating trade operations in Punjab & Kashmir borders. In 2023, PIPFPD in collaboration with South Asian Solidarity Collective (SASC) launched *Zuva*, a trimester journal for cross-border conversations, which was followed by an online discussion on the challenges in India-Pakistan relations involving various artists, writers, filmmakers and other civil society representatives from different walks of life from both sides.¹¹ According to the creators, *Zuva* provides a forum for the people of India and Pakistan to voice their diverse perspectives, concerns, aspirations for peace and progress in the region.¹² Initiatives such as the Chaophraya Dialogue¹³ which is an Indo-Pak Track-II initiative jointly undertaken by the Jinnah Institute and Australia India Institute (AII) running since 2008 have also helped in reducing war hysteria in both nations. Workshops by Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace works (WISCOMP) have been conducting regular interactions by tapping into ideas of cultural peace.¹⁴ These civil society groups and their initiatives for building peace between India and Pakistan are now appreciated all around the world and slowly creating a niche for themselves in the policy-making circles of the two nations and peacebuilding bodies. They have changed the dynamics of India-Pakistan relations to a great extent and now are labelled as important stakeholders in the peacebuilding processes.

Current Scenario

In the last decade, multitrack diplomacy between India and Pakistan has hit a roadblock, resulting in a lull in the peace building process. The current hostilities are mostly enmeshed in domestic politics on both sides of the border and have become an instrument of political mobilization. The cross-border movement of people has reduced. Since 2014, a chain of events has seen the governments give up even the semblance of bilateral discourse: they have ended all direct trade, travel by rail, bus and air, denied visas to each other's artists, musicians and writers, stopping all but religious pilgrimage exchanges as well as shunned the composite bilateral dialogue between officials. Since 2019, they have dispensed with High Commissioners and all political contacts altogether.¹⁵ The entertainment industry in India has shut out actors from Pakistan. Zee had discontinued airing Pakistani serials after the 2016 Uri attack, which initially became an instant hit, and later, *Zindagi* channel banned Pakistani shows in India. Not a single theater group crossed the border in the last few years to showcase their

plays in India. In the past, *Tehrik-e-Niswan* and *Ajoka* theater groups from Pakistan opened their shows to a full house and standing ovations. However, the quest for peace is always there and some kind of diplomacy takes place even if that means behind closed doors.

In May 2023, Pakistan's foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari arrived in India to attend a foreign ministers' summit of the SCO, becoming the first senior leader from the neighbouring country to visit India in almost twelve years. Alongside the official delegation, also came a group of senior Pakistani journalists who covered the visit and were very active on social media platforms, sharing bits from the visit. A famous Pakistani biker and vlogger, Abrar Hassan, travelled all the way to India and showed glimpses of India¹⁶ on his bike that garnered numerous views and positive reviews from both sides of the border. Hassan completed his 'friendship tour' in 30 days and covered 7,000 km. The biker shared several videos of different meetups in cities including Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Mumbai, Kerala and more. The vlogger documented his journey on his Youtube channel, WildLens by Abrar.

The cricket diplomacy got a boost this year when Pakistan team travelled to India to take part in the World Cup. The manner in which the team was received by cricket fans at the Hyderabad airport and at the hotel was overwhelming¹⁷, indicating that people want peace and normal relations with Pakistan. The cherry on top is that India and Pakistan decided to keep the Kartarpur Corridor open for pilgrimage. They agreed to set up the border crossing linking Gurudwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur Dera Baba Nanak shrine in India's Gurdaspur district. Besides, Urdu poetry and ghazals from Pakistan and shows like Coke Studio, MTV. Unplugged have a wide fan following in both countries. Therefore, soft power can be a potent tool for bringing harmonious relations and peace between India and Pakistan. Multitrack diplomacy can play a crucial role in building bridges between the two nations. People-to-people contact, cultural exchanges, and educational initiatives can promote understanding and empathy.

Conclusion

While the road to reconciliation between India and Pakistan may be challenging, it is not impossible. The New Year brings new hope that the time is right for India and Pakistan to focus on confidence-building measures to resume diplomatic and trade ties. With a new government in Pakistan led by PML-N, and Shehbaz Sharif as Prime Minister, some analysts are cautiously optimistic about the possibility of a renewed attempt by the two governments to improve ties, in large part because of the history that the Sharifs share with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bhartiya Janata Party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to X (*previously twitter*) congratulating Shehbaz Sharif for becoming Pakistan's 24th Prime Minister. Sharif also responded to the message positively, which is read as a hint about the prospect of a detente between the neighbours that have barely functional diplomatic relations. But any significant bilateral engagement will have to wait till India is done with its elections.

The newly elected Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif acknowledged that Pakistan is at a critical point. However, it cannot transform itself unless it revises its approach and relationship with its neighbours, particularly with India.¹⁸ Pakistan has desired normalization, but as an equal partner, and regards Kashmir as the defining issue for peace and friendship, especially after the abrogation of article 370 of the Indian constitution in 2019. India, for its

part, rejects these assumptions. For India, there is neither the compulsion nor an incentive to normalize relations with Pakistan in the immediate future. For now, India is quite comfortable with what Prof. Mohan has termed as “minimalism in its relations with Pakistan”.¹⁹ Courting an economic disaster, the compulsion may now be Pakistan’s to normalize relations with India, or to have some form of economic cooperation to say the least.²⁰ India and Pakistan have to plan for the long term and could think in terms of coming together to form partnerships in several areas of mutual interest and concern. To begin with, revive engagements through SAARC, open the border for movement of people and exchange of art and theater.

There is no magic wand to clear the mist of misunderstanding within days. It is imperative that the managers of our future respond to the overwhelming demand of the people for peace. There is a realization in India and Pakistan that it is better to keep the back channels open despite the differences and suspension of talks. It is true that political decisions are going to be taken at the Track one level, but it is imperative to recognize that multi-track diplomacy can help develop an environment conducive for positive outcomes. Deep-rooted prejudices and biases between India and Pakistan cannot be solved within the framework of official dialogues. The only solution is a multi-layered dialogue between the people of both nations. A conflict that is affecting not just a few government officials, but two entire countries will have to involve entire populations of the two countries as well and this can only be achieved through more interactions at people-to-people level. At this juncture, it might not be too foolhardy for India and Pakistan to think out of the so-called security box and conceive creative ways of solving this enduring conflict. An idea that seems fanciful now might create conditions for a peace that will not only be meaningful but also lasting. By prioritizing diplomacy, economic cooperation and people-to-people engagement, these two neighbours can work towards a more peaceful and prosperous South Asia, benefiting their people and the entire region. The journey may be challenging, but the potential rewards are worth every effort.

ENDNOTES

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