

ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



An Indo-Pak Search for the China-India Model

C. Raja Mohan¹

In the world's most accident-prone relationship, even the most carefully choreographed meetings between India and Pakistan tend to collapse in acrimony, thanks to the huge popular emotion and media hype that burden the ties between the South Asian subcontinent's siblings and rivals.

The private luncheon meeting in Delhi between India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the visiting Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has turned out to be a welcome exception. It appears to have set the stage for an early and productive visit by Prime Minister Singh to Islamabad.

No Indian prime minister has travelled to Pakistan since January 2004, when Singh's predecessor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, went there to attend a South Asian summit. The absence of frequent visits across the border underlines the unending conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours and their tense political relations.

Their leaders have often used sporting occasions to visit each other, break the political ice and kick-start their bilateral dialogue. The last Pakistan president to visit India, Pervez

¹ Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, and a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the ISAS.

Musharraf, used the occasion of an India-Pakistan cricket match to travel to Delhi in April 2005.

Musharraf's visit, in turn, set the stage for a positive phase in bilateral relations. But the terror attack on Mumbai, plotted and executed by militant groups in Pakistan, at the end of November 2008 derailed the bilateral relationship once again.

In the last two years, Singh and Zardari devoted considerable political energies towards a revival of the peace process. Negotiations between the two official establishments began last year.

Earlier this month, Singh and Zardari surprised the world by organizing a diplomatic opportunity for sitting down together. This time it was not a cricket match but spiritual pilgrimage that provided the occasion.

Zardari expressed the wish to make a private visit to the hugely popular Sufi shrine in Ajmer in India's western state of Rajasthan. Muslims from all over the subcontinent as well as a large number of Hindus visit the shrine in thousands every day. Singh seized the moment to invite Zardari for lunch.

Having set up an opportunity, Delhi and Islamabad had to carefully manage the public expectations. They said that the luncheon meeting in Delhi was not a summit and insisted that there would be no negotiations and ringing declarations by the two leaders.

The limited purpose, the two sides agreed, was to identify a few areas of agreement and set a date for Singh's visit to Pakistan. The prolonged lull in cross-border terror attacks in India and Zardari's bold liberalization of Pakistan's trade policy towards India provided the positive context for this political exploration.

Pakistan has been pressing for a visit by the Indian Prime Minister ever since Musharraf travelled to India. In response, Singh had been declaring that he was eager to visit Pakistan but he insisted that the trip should deliver substantive agreements.

Singh and Zardari now appeared to have found a way of doing this. After their meeting in Delhi, the two leaders announced that they had reviewed the entire bilateral relationship, touched on all the difficult issues and were eager to proceed step by step in the normalization of bilateral relations.

Implicit in the announcement that Singh would indeed travel to Pakistan at an early opportunity is the fact that the two leaders have agreed on some broad outcomes from the

visit. Senior officials from both sides will now sit down to translate the political understanding into specific agreements in the coming weeks.

So far so good! The real test for Singh and Zardari, however, begins now. Both face difficult political challenges at home. Singh runs a coalition government of many parties and has been having problems in mobilizing their support for any new policy initiatives.

In Pakistan too, Zardari's government is preparing for general elections and is locked in a political argument with the judiciary. The army in Pakistan has traditionally exercised great influence, if not a veto, on the policy initiatives towards India.

There are enough spoilers on either side to limit the possibilities. In the domestic politics of both countries, it has always been easier politically to oppose forward movement in the relations with the other rather than support it.

Despite the real obstacles, it is not difficult to visualize a solid economic agenda for Singh's visit to Pakistan. This has been made possible by recent moves by the Pakistan government to open up its economy for imports from India. Delhi in turn is looking at potential ways of boosting imports from Pakistan to reduce the trade deficit in its favour.

Singh and Zardari, however, will find the big political issues a lot trickier. India wants progress in bringing the plotters of the November-2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai to book and more broadly on dismantling Pakistan's terror infrastructure – issues on which Zardari has limited room for manoeuvre. Pakistan in turn wants a grand political gesture on Kashmir-related issues where Singh might find it hard to deliver.

It makes sense for Singh and Zardari to put the priority on economic cooperation rather than try and search for grand solutions to difficult political issues. In this context, Zardari's reported emphasis on the 'China model' in his talks with Singh could mark an important inflexion point in India-Pakistan relations.

China and India have made dramatic advance in recent years on economic cooperation, which in turn has made it easier to manage political differences and build military confidence. Zardari's call to adopt this model for Pakistan's relations with India is certainly welcome in India.

If Singh and Zardari can build a domestic political consensus in favour of the 'China model', the South Asian subcontinent could be a very different, more peaceful and prosperous place.

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