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India-Pakistan Ties: Do Signs of Warming Indicate Climate Change?

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Introduction

Of late there has been a vast deficit of good news from South Asia. Each country of that subcontinent confronts a legion and varied problems. The governments of at least three – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – face impending elections which, though not necessarily imminent, impinge persistently on their minds. This phenomenon is shaping all their actions. Each feels that there is much work to be done if it is to return to power. Each appears to be well past its salad days, and is understandably anxious to prolong its longevity. Happy tidings do not generally emanate from such circumstances. Indeed not many have in the recent times. One exception, somewhat intriguingly, though it can be explained as this paper will seek to do, is the gamut of India-Pakistan relations. There are ample discernible indications of a modicum of thawing in the chill that has traditionally enveloped them. The latest action indicative of that is the visit to Islamabad by the Indian Foreign Minister S M Krishna that, while not bereft of rhetoric, was not without substance either. This is definitely a sign of warming. But does it point to positive climate change? We shall see.

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Krishna-Khar Parleys

The personality of Krishna does not usually arouse aggressive emotions on the part of his interlocutors. Nor does that of his charming and much younger Pakistani counterpart, Hina Rabbani Khar. Whenever unscripted, or even while making formal remarks, they have been known to say kind things about each other. Last year, immediately upon assumption of office, Khar travelled to New Delhi. So early in her term it reflected the importance she placed on these bilateral relations. Despite some media distractions regarding her sartorial elegance, which might have actually advanced her overall effect, as well as her acceptability to the Indian masses in general and fashion-conscious youth in particular, the trip was able to create a sense of affability between the two Ministers. Diplomacy is always the better for it. Since then Krishna has been known to be favourably disposed towards paying a return visit. The outcome now will of course determine if the anticipation was worthwhile.

The build-up to the event, both political and economic, was as good as could have been expected between the two traditionally bitter rivals. Politically, the bilateral relations, stalled following the 2008 Mumbai mayhem, began to be resuscitated with the earlier Khar visit to Delhi, then a trip to the Ajmer shrine by Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari last April, and a pleasant bilateral between him and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Summit in Tehran this August. During the latter event both decided to take the process of bilateral relations forward and Zardari extended an invitation to Singh to visit Pakistan. Singh did not raise the issue of the cyber campaign allegedly by Pakistanis that actuated mass exodus of Assamese hill tribal communities back home from southern India, which could have unnecessarily queered the pitch of understanding. Mutual accusations are on the decline. The Indians have scaled down accusations of state-sponsored terrorism by Pakistan, and Pakistanis have likewise significantly lowered allegations of interference by the Indians in Balochistan. This development is assisted by a general burgeoning perception in Pakistan that India is no longer the 'main enemy', many now attributing those somewhat unsavoury credentials to the United States and the West.

On the economic side there has been much progress, though as yet mainly on paper. Pakistan has announced a 'most favoured nation' status for India by the end of 2012. It may be recalled that India had already granted the same to Pakistan in 1996, but retaining some barriers (Most barriers are anyhow 'non-trade' or NTBs, and need to be dismantled if the desired goal is to be achieved). A happy sign was when in March 2012 Pakistan decided to allow a move from a 'positive list' of 2000 items to a 'negative list' of 1209 items for now, with the intention of phasing it out altogether when the MFN status kicks in. India, on its part, has agreed to open itself up to Pakistani foreign direct investment. To ease smooth trade and facilitate unhindered financial transactions, the two central banks will be allowed to open up branches in each other's territories. While the implementation of agreements arrived at between the two countries tends to move at an irritatingly placid snail's pace, there is the

practical view that reaching the understanding in the first place is no mean achievement. That has at least been achieved.

New Visa Regime

A practical outcome of the visit has been the signing of the new visa regime by Krishna and the Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik. While ready for some months, it was awaiting formal inking at a 'high political level', particularly by Pakistan, whose political government understandably deemed it fit to take the credit for it than leave it for the faceless technocrats. This would substantially increase the number of visitors for both countries. Eight categories of visas would be issued. The types are diplomatic, non-diplomatic, official, transit, tourist, civil society, media and business visas. Five hundred Pakistanis would be allowed pilgrimage to the holy shrine at Ajmer, while Indian Sikhs would be able to visit Pakistan for religious festivals. Special concession would be accorded to senior citizens. For both nations this would be a highly popular move in favour of greater people-to-people contacts, often spoken of, but not to-date, meriting serious attention.

The talks were warm and friendly. Zardari was said to have stressed the need to move beyond reiteration of held positions to more substantive results. He identified terrorism as a 'common enemy' and pledged to fight it jointly, 'to the finish' in his words, somewhat dramatising for effect what he believed, with reason, to be music to Indian ears. Urging that 'we learn from the past', Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf added that 'we cannot change neighbours' (though not mentioning if *that* was ever a serious Pakistani aspiration!). Significantly Khar underscored the need to 'de-link' from history and stop being its 'hostage'. This mildly hinted at circumventing the issue of Kashmir for now, though she carefully called for 'simultaneous progress', including on Kashmir. As if to help her, should her 'forward-looking' strategy land her in any trouble in Pakistan, a happy Krishna offered a 'step-by-step' formula: "to do what is do-able in the immediate future...ultimately coming to terms with complex issues" (including possibly Kashmir).

Under Watchful Eyes

This festive feast of friendliness was doubtlessly being closely watched and monitored by a crucial actor, perhaps *the* critical actor, at least as far as Pakistan is concerned, the Army. Its leadership headed by General Ashfaq Kayani was not on the stage for now, but one might confidently stress without fear of contradiction, his approval must have been sought and obtained by the civilian authorities. Without it, the signing of a raft of pacts would be akin to a flock of sheep passing resolutions in favour of vegetarianism while the leopard remained of another opinion. But the Army has no reason to negate these advances. It knows an all-out

war between the two powers can be well nigh ruled out because of each other's nuclear deterrence. Also enmity with India is no longer its sole *raison d'être*; today the Taliban at home and potential adversaries on the West point to its need. Historically, the Army in power has not always sought conflict with India, as Ayub Khan's relations with Jawaharlal Nehru and Pervez Musharraf's with Singh indicate. Finally, if the people in Pakistan genuinely favour *détente* as it now appears they do, the Army is also likely to follow suit.

Beyond the Present

The next milestone in this relationship would be a Manmohan Singh visit to Pakistan. It will help unleash tremendous positive energies on both sides. It is better undertaken sooner than later, as the political situations both for him and Zardari (and also Ashraf who is now surviving on the Pakistan Supreme Court's good grace) are on a freefall. But Singh has reasons to be circumspect. His trip to his friendliest neighbour Bangladesh last year was an unmitigated disaster, thanks to the idiosyncrasy of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Happily in the case of Pakistan there is no such factor as an impeding 'State Chief Minister' (The British politician and analyst Richard Crossman had once written that in Great Britain the 'Cabinet form of Government' has given way to 'Prime Ministerial Government', referring to the transfer of real power from the cabinet to its head: in India it seems that one can increasingly speak of a shift from the 'Prime Ministerial' to the 'Chief ministerial', meaning a relocation of authority entirely away from New Delhi to the States!)

Yet another cause for hesitation is a possible comparison that may be drawn with Neville Chamberlain's sojourn in Munich before World War II, and his return to London with the ill-advised brandishing of the promise of 'peace in our times', to be rudely shaken by the German invasion of Poland immediately thereafter. However Manmohan Singh, despite the current challenges to his reputation for competence, is too honourable a man to play by calculations of immediate political gains or losses. Only by a bold action can he carve for himself even at this late stage a niche in the annals of diplomacy. Can he dare damn the consequences, and do an Anwar Sadat? On it may depend, to a large measure, whether the present warming is a prelude to a positive climate change in the relations between India and Pakistan.

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