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India-Pakistan Peace Process: The Risk of a Breakdown

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The barbaric beheading of an Indian soldier earlier this month, allegedly by the Pakistan Army on the Line of Control that separates the two countries in the disputed frontier of Jammu & Kashmir, appears to have breached the barrier of Delhi's tolerance.

As public outrage spreads in India and the political clamour from the opposition parties for retribution acquires rare intensity, the usually stoic Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has chosen to end his silence.

Speaking to reporters on the margins of an Indian Army function on 15 January 2013, the Prime Minister declared that "after this dastardly act, there cannot be business as usual with Pakistan". Dr Singh also demanded that the perpetrators of this outrage must be brought to book by the Government of Pakistan.

The Prime Minister's remarks were amplified by India's External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid on the same day. Commenting on Pakistan's "brazen denial" of the Indian charges, he said Islamabad would be ill-advised to conclude that "the lack of a proper response from the Government of Pakistan to our repeated demarches on this incident will be ignored and that bilateral relations could be unaffected".

That these were not empty words became clear when India put on hold at the very last minute the implementation of 'visa on arrival' scheme for senior citizens from Pakistan at the Attari-Wagah border in the Punjab.

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Reports from Delhi also suggest that the Government of India has weighed in to curtail sporting contact in hockey and women's cricket. It has also reportedly postponed bilateral talks on trade and commercial cooperation.

Coming from the current government in Delhi, these measures are indeed serious and signal Delhi's willingness to risk a potential breakdown of the peace process in demanding an end to Pakistan Army's provocations on the Line of Control.

As Mr Khurshid put it, "actions by the Pakistan Army, which are in contravention of all norms of international conduct, not only constitute a grave provocation but lead us to draw appropriate conclusions about Pakistan's seriousness in pursuing normalisation of relations with India."

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar denied all Indian charges, expressed deep disappointment at the Indian reaction and voiced Islamabad's hopes to sustain the wide-ranging dialogue with India.

Gathering Military Tension

Current indicators, however, point to the danger of a significant discontinuity in the India-Pakistan peace process that had begun to look promising in 2012. The impact of the gathering military tension is likely to go well beyond the bilateral relations and affect the internal dynamics in both countries as well as the situation in Afghanistan, where the United States is preparing to end its combat role.

For nearly nine years, Dr Singh has persisted with a serious effort to normalise relations with Pakistan despite the frequent terrorist attacks in India that undermined the support for the peace process among the Indian political class as well as the public.

After the outrageous attacks, planned and executed from across the border in Pakistan, on Mumbai at the end of November 2008, Dr Singh resisted calls for military escalation and within a year sought to revive the dialogue with Pakistan.

The efforts of Dr Singh seemed to pay off, as he successfully negotiated two consequential agreements with the civilian government in Pakistan led by President Asif Ali Zardari last year.

One was an agreement to liberalise the hugely restrictive visa regime between the two countries. The agreement was signed during the visit of Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik to Delhi in December 2012.

Equally important was the finalisation of a road map to establish normal trade relations between the two countries. Under the agreement, Pakistan was to give most-favoured-nation status to India. Delhi, which had given a similar status to Pakistan in 1996, agreed to remove non-tariff barriers against exports from Pakistan.

If the prospects for trade liberalisation and easier people-to-people contact generated much enthusiasm on both sides of the border, the rapid escalation of military tensions in the New Year has cast of a pall of gloom.

Over the last decade, terrorist incidents in India were the principal threats to the India-Pakistan peace process. Few expected military tensions on the border might derail it. A ceasefire had been in place since the end of 2003. Despite occasional accusations of violation from both sides, the ceasefire seemed to be a relatively stable arrangement.

The ceasefire had indeed helped the two countries to move away from recurrent military crises that rocked bilateral relations from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Delhi could productively focus on expanding cooperation with Islamabad.

For Pakistan, which began to face serious security threats on its western borders, the ceasefire helped shift its armed forces away from the traditional military challenge on its eastern borders with India.

Political Crises in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the tensions with India have coincided with a series of domestic political crises. These include the mounting extremist attacks on Pakistan's minorities, including the large Shia population, and a populist campaign to oust the civilian government before it completes its full tenure and orders fresh elections, due this year.

As a Canadian-Pakistani cleric Muhammad Tahir-ul Qadri brought thousands of people into Islamabad this week demanding the resignation of the Zardari government and the dissolution of elected assemblies, the Supreme Court ordered the arrest of Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf in a corruption case relating to his earlier charge as Minister of Power.

Supporters of Mr Ashraf have accused the Army, which has long ruled Pakistan, of trying to destabilise the civilian government in collaboration with the higher judiciary and through the promotion of Mr Qadri. While the Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi has denied these allegations, there is a profound sense of foreboding among Pakistan's civilian leaders.

While a crisis seems less imminent in India, the tensions on the border with Pakistan are feeding into a terribly competitive posturing among the ruling Congress and the opposition parties. A major terrorist incident at this juncture could quickly turn up the heat on Dr Singh to take muscular actions against Pakistan.

Many analysts in India are convinced that the provocations of the Pakistan Army are intimately linked to the improvement in the US-Pakistan relations in the last few months. They suggest that Washington's reliance on Rawalpindi to facilitate a smooth exit for American troops from Afghanistan and bring the Taliban to the negotiating table has emboldened the Pakistan Army. The argument concludes that renewed confrontation with India would allow Rawalpindi to re-emerge as the arbiter of Pakistan's domestic politics. Whether this perception is accurate or not, the tension between India and Pakistan is bound to complicate the political dynamic in Afghanistan. Whichever way one looks at it, the Ides of January 2013 have begun to deepen the crisis in South Asia.

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