



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

India-Pakistan Relations: Breaking the Logjam

Shamsa Nawaz, Research Fellow, ISSI

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Cooperation not confrontation was the key message of the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, during Modi's visit to Pakistan on December 25, 2015. The unfolding of non-conventional diplomacy was widely acclaimed. The US State Department and the UN spokesperson have welcomed the development, calling it beneficial for the people of the region. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has urged the two nations to continue and strengthen this process. The spokesperson of Chinese Foreign Ministry also regarded the outreach as significant to regional peace, stability and development.

Earlier, while considering the conflicts between India and Pakistan as an obstacle to prosperity in the region, Sushma Swaraj, India's External Affairs Minister, apprised Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the parliament of India) that, "the continued estrangement of two neighbours is a hurdle to the realisation of our shared vision of a peaceful and prosperous region." She added, "our goal is to explore and establish cooperation."

During Sawaraj's visit to Pakistan to attend the Heart of Asia Conference held on 7-8 December, 2015, a joint communiqué was also issued at the end of the ministerial meeting between Sartaz Aziz and Sushma Swaraj. The last meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries was held in 2012. Both agreed on the resumption of unrestricted talks. The decision was reached after an earlier successful meeting between the National Security Advisors of both India and Pakistan in Bangkok on December 6, 2015.

The renamed 'Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue', with the inclusion of two new components, humanitarian issues and religious tourism, retains all the issues of the 'Composite Dialogue' initiated in 1997. The proposed comprehensive dialogue would include the issues of peace and security, confidence-building measures, Jammu and Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, Wullar barrage/Tulbal navigation project, economic and commercial cooperation, counter-terrorism, narcotics control and people-to-people exchanges. The mechanism of the dialogue is to be sorted out by Foreign Secretaries of the two countries in January 2016. Swaraj also confirmed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi could visit Pakistan to attend the Summit of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), expected to be held in September 2016, making it the first visit by India's Prime Minister since 2004, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee had come to attend the SAARC Summit. Swaraj, on her return assured Delhi that Islamabad would accelerate the judicial process against those responsible for the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

While talking to *India Today* Consulting Editor in December 2015, Pakistan's High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit said that Dawood Ibrahim, Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi and Hafiz Saeed were not the main cause of tension between India and Pakistan. Instead, Jammu and Kashmir is the main cause of distrust and lack of confidence. "We are also trying to fight terrorism so we know how it feels. Please do not associate us with any terror attack that happens across the world."

Pakistan's opposition political parties have also welcomed the thaw and have joined the government in their support to peaceful means for the solution of long-standing problems since war is not an option. They realise that the moves to seek conflict management are necessary to promote regional cooperation.

This revival of optimism is a welcome step. Neither the terrorist attack on Pathankot Air base in India on January 2, 2016, nor the attack on Indian Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, the same day, have derailed the mutual confidence thus far. However, the relationship is still dominated by conflicting threat perceptions, contradictory objectives and historically entrenched mutual distrust, which have been detrimental to their collective prosperity.

India and Pakistan need to have a cooperative and sustained counter-terrorism strategy. The continuation of terrorism as a tactic or strategy in either the Balochistan province, Karachi and FATA, or for that matter support to the Tehrik-i-Taliban by India, would be corrosive and counter-productive. Pakistan is fighting violent extremism. It has lost more than 62,000 lives in this war. Whereas, the wave of *Hindutva* and the communal activism of Shiv Sena and Rashtriya Swayemsvak Sangh (RSS) in India have added to the concerns of the Muslims living in Pakistan who have their families in India. To make the atmosphere conducive for talks, the Indian government has to take steps to contain the rising tide of communalism. Similarly, a fair and speedy trial of Samjhota Express incident can help in improving mutual trust.

There are enormous prospects for unity in its cultural and geographical diversity despite the continuing disputes and differences between India and Pakistan. More people-to-people contacts, exchanges between academics, media persons, parliamentarians and artists could promote cultural and civilisational ties.

The two countries clearly need to pursue regional cooperation through enhanced connectivity and economic linkages. But this goal will remain elusive until some of the divisive issues are skilfully

managed, if not partially resolved. Therefore, in the short-term, the best regional integrative approach could be pursued through South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Pakistan will be hosting the SAARC summit later this year. This summit could act not only as a catalyst for meaningful regional cooperation, but could also be a good backdrop for bilateral engagement between India and Pakistan.

It would be necessary in the entire process to continue to consult the people of Kashmir who are key stakeholders. Pakistan has maintained the tradition of consulting *Kashmiris* in Azad Kashmir and Indian Held Kashmir and has been taking them in confidence before and after the dialogue. India should therefore, not balk at such consultations. After all, it was former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, who took the initiative of inaugurating the office of All Pakistan Hurriyat Conference (APHC) in Delhi in 1995.