

Decoding Recent Indo-Pak Peace Gestures

After a long period of military and diplomatic tension between the two South Asian nuclear powers, India and Pakistan have recently made friendly gestures to one another. Dr Subhan Ullah explores if this development, in the uniquely changed global scenario of a post-Pandemic world alongside China's increasing entrenchment in the region, holds the promise of better relations and longer-term peace in the region?

Finally, good news from South Asia: the two arch-rival nuclear-armed nations, India and Pakistan, have indicated that they are willing to engage with each other. In February 2021, [the Director General of Military Operations \(DGMOs\)](#) of both countries issued a joint statement to re-commit themselves to the [2003 ceasefire arrangements](#) — a huge sigh of relief for residents on either side of the [Line of Control](#), a de-facto border between Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. A few days before the DGMOs joint statement, Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa signalled in a speech that 'It is time to extend the hand of peace in all directions.' This peace gesture from Pakistan's military brass was perceived as Pakistan's willingness to re-engage with India.

Bilateral relations between the two countries reached an extremely low point following the [Pulwama terror](#) in 2019 incident in Indian-administered Kashmir, leading India to retaliate with air strikes on Balakot — a territory deep inside the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The crisis escalated when Pakistani fighter jets attempted to retaliate, resulting in a brief aerial skirmish between the two powerful air forces.

The tit-for-tat diplomacy between India-Pakistan is inherently ineffective. Dialogue and the peace process between the two countries is the only way forward for long-lasting peace in South Asia. India has also shown interest in reviving the peace process, and (recently) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [tweeted](#) his best wishes to his Pakistani counterpart on 20 March 2021, after Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan tested positive for Covid-19.

Two days later, on 22 March, [Prime Minister Modi sent greetings to his Pakistani counterpart](#), saying 'India desires cordial relations with the people of Pakistan'. There are rumours that a country in the Middle East (probably UAE, or Saudi Arabia) is playing a crucial role in brokering peace talks between the two South Asian countries. In recent times, representatives of both countries have attempted to score points against each other at various international fora (UN General Assembly, UN Human Rights Council, etc). Back-channel diplomacy in such a hostile environment could potentially be the only way forward to satisfy the domestic population in both countries, with emotion and politics set aside when assessing the complex relationship between the two countries. However, this new peace process is highly fragile and can be derailed by non-state actors in both countries.

Looking at the content of Prime Minister Modi's letter 'An environment of trust, devoid of terror and hostility' seems to be a precondition by India for the resumption of peace talks. Historically, the current BJP government in India had a tough stance against resuming peace talks with Pakistan, saying that '[Terror and talks cannot go together](#)', an accusation which Islamabad has strenuously denied. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan responded with a similar letter of greetings, saying that '[durable peace and stability in South Asia is contingent upon resolving all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan, in particular the Jammu and Kashmir dispute](#)'.

The changing global political landscape in a post-Covid world requires increasing regional cooperation. One may agree or disagree, but India has demonstrated its global leadership by developing and distributing Covid vaccines, and this '[vaccine diplomacy](#)' has so far proven very effective in favour of India's positive global image. Pakistan, on the other hand, is playing an impressive role in mediating the Afghan peace process; a stable Afghanistan will bring desperately-needed stability, change the socio-economic dynamics of the entire region, and both Pakistan and India are likely to benefit by securing a greater share in the Afghan business market. A long-lasting peace agreement between India and Pakistan has the potential to provide direct road access to Afghanistan via Pakistan. India can also use Pakistan's geographical proximity in accessing the Central Asian markets via Afghanistan.

At the moment, [India is aiming to utilise Iran's Chabahar port](#) in securing an alternative access route to the Central Asian countries — a route that is lengthy, circuitous and costly. A more direct supply chain access through Pakistan can substantially reduce time and costs for Indian investors: for instance, a vehicle carrying fruits and vegetables departing from Amritsar (India) in the early morning can arrive at Jalalabad (Afghanistan) in the evening of the same day, and vice versa if it can travel via Pakistan — an opportunity that is much needed if India would like to compete with the dominance of China in the region.

It is indeed premature to have too many expectations at the moment. Media outlets in both countries have started constructing their own national narratives of the peace initiative. As usual, several questions and queries are being debated in both countries; the common questions are: is this peace process going to be long-lasting? Would there be a permanent resolution to the outstanding disputes, including Kashmir? Is the Kashmiri leadership being taken on board in the ongoing peace process? Would there be any demilitarisation in the Kashmir region? Will India restore the autonomy and special status of Jammu and Kashmir? Will there be a resumption of Secretary-level talks between the two nations? Are the two countries going to restore full diplomatic relations (by reinstating their High Commissioners in the respective in-country High Commissions)? Would there be a resumption of cricket matches between the two countries? Would the two countries restore trading activities? Would there be a temporary suspension of the mutual blame-game rhetoric? Who is supporting the mediation process? There is a long way down the road to get some of these questions answered in months and years to come. The whole world will be watching and expecting some tangible outcomes.

On a positive note, more surprises are likely to emerge from Indo-Pak negotiations. There are speculations that Prime Minister Modi may potentially visit Pakistan to attend the pending [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation \(SAARC\)](#) summit in Pakistan, which was scheduled to be held in November 2016 but was cancelled when India refused to attend the Summit following an [attack on an Indian army camp in Uri, Kashmir](#). Until then, we wait and watch, and celebrate the initial peace gestures from both countries.

This article gives the views of the author and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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