

India-Pakistan relations: From optimism to anxiety?

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Michael Kugelman argues that warming bilateral relations between India and Pakistan could take a hit – before bouncing back – following this week’s troop deaths along the Line of Control.

Everything had been going so well.

In early 2011, New Delhi and Islamabad resumed their Composite Dialogue—a process that had been suspended after the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai. Over the course of 2011 and much of 2012, confidence-building measures ensued and mutual goodwill proliferated. There were high-level meetings, civil society and business exchanges, and a milestone visa agreement. Most significantly, Pakistan decided to [extend](#) Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to India, 15 years after New Delhi granted it to Islamabad.

During this period, the bilateral relationship weathered several incidents that years ago may have triggered war. In the summer of 2011, [terrorists once again struck in Mumbai](#). New Delhi neither responded punitively nor uttered any harsh words toward Islamabad. Instead, it vowed to work with Pakistan to track down the perpetrators. Then, in October 2011, [an Indian army helicopter drifted into Pakistani airspace](#). The Pakistani military didn’t shoot down the chopper or cause much trouble for its occupants. After being detained briefly, the Indian troops were sent home unharmed. In 2012, the two sides’ armies exchanged fire along the Line of Control (LoC), their disputed border in Kashmir, [more than 75 times](#). Yet relations were wholly unaffected.



This brings us to this week. On Sunday, a Pakistani soldier was shot to death along the LoC. Two days later, two Indian troops were killed—and [according to the Indian media](#), one of them was beheaded. New Delhi used some of the [strongest language](#) it has directed toward Pakistan in years, with India’s foreign minister describing this latter incident as a “grave provocation.” He noted ominously that any response would be “proportionate.” Pakistan, meanwhile, [denies](#) that its troops killed Indian soldiers.

These two border clashes occurred just weeks after several additional setbacks to the warming trend in India-Pakistan relations. In order to consummate the MFN agreement, Pakistan was supposed to phase out its negative list – goods that cannot be exported to India – by the end of 2012. The date has come and gone, and the negative list remains. The Pakistani media now speculate that the whole process may be delayed for [at least six months](#).

Additionally, in recent weeks India has become [increasingly alarmed](#) by Pakistan’s growing prominence in the Afghanistan endgame negotiations. A post-2014 scenario featuring a political role for the Taliban (an outcome Islamabad would welcome) appears ever more likely. India – where memories of the 2008 Mumbai attacks remain raw – understandably fears this could allow Afghanistan to once again become a sanctuary for anti-India militants.

So the optimism of 2011 and 2012 is now morphing into considerable anxiety. Yet this pattern is a perfect reflection of the fits and starts that characterise the history of India-Pakistan relations. Several times in the last 60 years, the two rivals have made great progress toward normalising ties—only to regress. In the early 1950s, India became Pakistan’s largest trading partner, yet relations were shattered when the two nations went to war in 1965.

India-Pakistan relations make for the ultimate “we’ve been here before” relationship. Much has been made of the Pakistani military’s [announcement](#) earlier this month that “homegrown militancy” – not India – is now Pakistan’s chief security threat. [Rawalpindi has in fact said this before](#), including in an internal ISI report in 2010. Indians back

then [reacted with scepticism](#). Some noted that just a few weeks earlier, Pakistan's army chief had insisted that India remained the biggest threat. Others speculated that the ISI had concocted the report to get more international relief aid for the catastrophic flooding then ravaging Pakistan.

In effect, India and Pakistan resemble two awkward dance partners. After they manage to take one halting step forward, they invariably stumble two steps backward.

Will the bilateral relationship rebound from the discouraging events of recent days? Quite possibly, given the strong reservoir of goodwill accumulated over the last two years. Yet if history is any guide, we should temper our optimism and expect any exhilarating highs to eventually succumb to more lows—before the cycle begins anew.

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