

Reviving the thaw? Punjab's potential in improving India-Pakistan relations



*Indian and Pakistani Punjab should explore potential opportunities together, writes **Tridivesh Singh Maini**. All stakeholders including political parties, the business community, religious organisations, and civil society should be involved in this process if Pakistan and India are to move beyond the current climate.*

After taking over as Chief Minister of Punjab (India), [Captain Amarinder Singh, March 2017, took up the issue of sale of the state's surplus power to Pakistan or Nepal with Indian PM, Narendra Modi](#). Logistically, it makes sense to sell electricity to Pakistan, given the fact that Punjab shares a border with Pakistan and the Goindwal Sahib thermal plant (near Amritsar) is located close to the international border. A report by the Indian Institute of Management IIM (Ahmedabad) titled, ['Tariff and related matters: The electricity sector in Punjab'](#) batted for the sale of surplus power to Pakistan, given Punjab's location as well as the acute energy crisis in Pakistan, stating, 'Pakistan is facing acute energy crisis at the moment. There is scope to export power to Pakistan. The total available capacity for generation in Pakistan was only 12,361 megawatts (MW) in April 2016'.

Former Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab, Sukhbir Singh Badal [had first taken up this issue, during his visit to Pakistan in November 2012](#), with Shahbaz Sharif, CM of Punjab (Pakistan). As a result of a number of factors including tensions across the Line of Control (LoC); increasing violence in the state of Kashmir; and domestic instability in Pakistan (leading to the removal of Nawaz Sharif as both Prime Minister and President of the Pakistan Muslim League); there has been limited space for taking forward such a proposal, or exploring other initiatives between the two Punjabs. The ultra-nationalistic discourse in India, and the tendency of the political leadership to play to the gallery has worsened things and reduced space for any sort of outreach.

However, some recent developments in the context of the bilateral relationship, provide a sliver of hope. At the humanitarian level, [both sides have agreed to take steps for the release of prisoners languishing in jails on either side](#). In this context, Pakistan accepted India's proposal to exchange women prisoners, those who are mentally challenged or have special needs and those above 70 years of age. Both sides have also agreed to the revival of a judicial commission which had been set up with the aim of expediting the speedy release of prisoners, who had finished their sentences. Finally, visits of medical experts to interact with mentally challenged prisoners for their repatriation. The Pakistan foreign minister, Khwaja Asif proposed that prisoners over 60 and below 18 be released.

A short-lived thaw?

If one were to look beyond humanitarian gestures, [India attended the ground breaking ceremony of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline](#), with Minister of State for External Affairs, MJ Akbar representing India. This was a significant development given the fact that India had avoided attending multilateral summits with Pakistan. [India also extended an invitation to Pakistan Commerce Minister, Pervaiz Malik](#), to attend the informal WTO ministerial meeting in New Delhi (March 19-20, 2018). Malik accepted the invite, but ultimately tensions between both countries arising out of [harassment of diplomats](#), meant that the thaw was short-lived.

Just as relations between both countries seemed to be getting slightly on track they are back to square one – with both sides embroiled in tit-for-tat conflict. India has sent numerous complaints to Pakistan of Indian diplomats, posted in Pakistan being harassed. India stated that the raid by [Pakistani security agencies on the premises](#), and the stopping of construction work was the tipping point. While Pakistan [stopped electricity and water supply to a residential building housing Indian diplomats for a week](#), [India stopped gas supply to the Pakistan High Commission](#). A Pakistani diplomat posted in India posted a [video](#) where he along with his family members was harassed, similarly vehicles of Pakistani diplomats' children were stopped and photographed.

As a result, the Pakistan High Commissioner to India [Sohail Mahmood was](#) recalled by Pakistan for consultations with regard to the complaints of harassment, and the Commerce Minister also decided not to attend the WTO meeting in New Delhi.

The state of Punjab would have been closely watching these developments. In the past, Punjab has played a key role in previous thaws between the two countries (2004-2007) and (2011-2014) by promoting greater people-to-people contact, connectivity and more robust economic linkages between both countries. Some of the important initiatives which were taken to enhance connectivity and economic linkages between the two Punjab's were [the introduction of a bus service](#) connecting the holy cities of Amritsar (Punjab, India) and Nankana Sahib – near Lahore (birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev the first Guru of the Sikhs). In addition to this [an Integrated Check Post was set up at Attari](#) (on the Indian side of the border) to expand bilateral trade through the Wagah-Attari land route.

Punjab (Pakistan) also took some interesting steps recently. The [Punjab Sikhs Anand Karaj Marriages Act 2018](#), was approved by the Punjab Assembly (Pakistan). This legislation will provide [legal status](#) and recognition to Sikh marriages in the province. The bill was tabled by minority member Punjab Assembly (MPA) Ramesh Singh Arora, a member of the PML-N.

As and when both countries think of engaging with each other on economic issues and people-to-people contact, Indian Punjab will have an important role to play. While Dr. Manmohan Singh realised the relevance of Punjab as an important stakeholder in India-Pakistan relations, the same cannot be said of the Modi government.

Dr. Manmohan Singh supported initiatives of the erstwhile Shiromani Akali Dal Government (SAD) an ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The current government, led by Narendra Modi, however [has not really looked at Punjab as a stakeholder in the relationship](#). In fact, even on issues like religious pilgrimages of the Sikhs the government has been rather indifferent. In 2017, two Jathas (groups of Sikhs pilgrims) which were to visit Pakistan for paying obeisance, [were told that they would not be able to cross over at the last minute](#). Both the governments blamed each other for the fiasco, but very few times have religious pilgrimages faced such a problem but given [recent reports](#) of Pakistani pilgrims being turned away, this appears to be a growing issue.



The Attari border check post. Photo credit: [VΞ, CC BY SA-3.0](#).

Focus on Eastern Borders

The current government has prioritised connectivity between North Eastern India and Bangladesh and Myanmar, but has not given the same importance to land trade between Wagah-Attari due to tensions between both countries. This in spite of the fact, that politicians from Punjab have been battling for greater trade and people to people linkages.

PM Modi in fact attributed the party's performance in North Eastern states (Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland) to the BJP government's focus on enhancing connectivity with neighbouring Bangladesh.

Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley [while speaking in Bangladesh during a visit last year](#) stated:

"I am happy to note the increased thrust placed by both our governments on the restoration of pre-1965 linkages, encompassing road, rail, water, and coastal shipping connections. I am confident that this will help to increase bilateral trade and foster people-to-people contacts between our countries,"

What Jaitley forgot was the close links between the two Punjab's before the 1965 war, apart from the Wagah-Attari land route, even other land crossings, such as Hussainiwala-Kasur, were open for trade, and people-to-people contact was far greater than what it is today.

Indian Punjab should try to explore possible opportunities with Pakistani Punjab, and apart from imaginative thinking, the political leadership needs to exhibit boldness. All stakeholders, which includes political parties across the board, the business community and even religious organisations along with civil society, should be involved in this process. Reaching out to the Chief Minister of Pakistani Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif (brother of Nawaz Sharif) and the PML-N's Prime Ministerial candidate, would be beneficial not just for Punjab, but also for the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship.

Post the election verdict of June 2018, it would make sense for Indian Punjab to reach out to the next government, in all probability, a PML-N one led by Shahbaz Sharif (brother of Nawaz Sharif). One week is a long time in politics, and in three months a lot can change in India-Pakistan relations. Hopefully, post June 2018, there shall be some room for Indian Punjab to engage with Pakistani Punjab and both countries will think beyond the security narrative.

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Cover image: At the end of the guard changing ceremony at the Pakistan-India border the respective flags are lowered. Photo credit: [Tore Umes](#), [CC BY 2.0](#).

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