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Relations between Pakistan and India: Opportunities and prospects

A practical roadmap for reviving India-Pakistan relations could include inter-parliamentary dialogue, sports events, visa regime simplification, and the development of cultural ties.



Relations between India and Pakistan have remained contentious over a variety of issues since their independence from Britain in 1947 and the formation of India and Pakistan. Three major wars, an unofficial war in 1999, and some border clashes have also occurred between the two countries. Since 2019, diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries have declined significantly after India revoked Article 370. Despite hopes for a restoration of relations in March 2021, there has been no progress.

More attention to the previous main peace agreements is needed to normalize relations. Terrorism remains a major concern in bilateral relations. India believes that Pakistan supports terrorist groups operating in Kashmir, a charge that Pakistan denies it. New Delhi believes that it is ready to deal with Pakistan, but Pakistan must stop cross-border

terrorism and not use it as a tool. Pakistani officials also sometimes accuse India of interfering in Pakistan's Balochistan and other regions.

Both countries claim sovereignty over the Kashmir region. Despite allegations of human rights violations by India and accusations of Pakistan supporting internal insurgencies in the region, there is no end to the periodic clashes on the Line of Control, and it is the main obstacle to the normalization of relations and meaningful diplomatic progress.

While Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar continues to see Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as part of India, ensuring the return of POK to India is a national obligation, and Pakistan's withdrawal from Kashmir (PoK) will completely resolve the Kashmir issue. In addition, a significant part of the public opinion of the two countries still does not view the neighbor positively. A 2022 survey by the Center for Policy Research (CPR) found that more than 60 percent of Indians and more than half of Pakistanis believe that the two countries cannot have friendly relations in this decade.

The role of Pakistan's political structure and the role of powerful groups and pressures from religious groups in preventing the reduction of tension was overlooked. The role of nationalism in India-Pakistan relations and variables such as the perception of the ruling political elites in the two countries have harmed the quality of India-Pakistan relations.

The perception of receiving a threat from each other and the disruption of the balance of power against each other can be a serious obstacle to improving relations.

Islamabad fears the influence of the Indian lobby in other countries (especially the United States) in creating restrictions. Also, despite the quadrilateral alliance consisting of India, the United States, Australia, and Japan, the expansion of interactions and Donald Trump's meeting with Narendra Modi and the increase in arms exports from the United States to India, Pakistan is concerned about the expansion of broader cooperation to its detriment in the region.

While India and Pakistan remain nuclear enemies, the model of my enemy's enemy is my friend still has full application in their relations. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have worsened since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul, and the process of developing India-Taliban relations has developed. Also, since August 2024, relations between India and the new government of Bangladesh have cooled, and the old hostility between Pakistan and Bangladesh is slowly being restored to "friendly" relations with the meetings of senior political and military officials. The expansion of economic and strategic relations, intelligence, and military cooperation between Bangladesh and Pakistan in 2025 creates more concerns for India.

One of the most important sources of conflict between the two countries is the control of the Indus River as a shared river. These disputes were partially resolved with the Indus Water Treaty in 1960. But while Pakistan is dependent on the rivers of the Indus Basin as a downstream country, the dominance of hydropolitical and geopolitical thoughts related to water, along with different economic, energy, security, cultural, political, military, and social attitudes, will lead to the continuation of the crisis.

Tension or improvement

South Asia is most affected by climate change, and the most devastating impact of climate change on the Indus Basin and water scarcity with a huge increase in population is obvious. In the meantime, working on common challenges and confronting them requires positive relations between the two countries.

While South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in terms of collective response to pandemics and crises, the revival of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is in the interest of both countries. The regional opportunities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the two countries' membership in this organization can also be seen in the light of the de-escalation in India-Pakistan relations.

In 2023, despite the severance of diplomatic relations between the two countries, some hopes were raised, such as Pakistan issuing visas to Indian Sikh and Hindu pilgrims and the release of Indian fishermen and civilians. When Mr. Shehbaz Sharif became the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Modi congratulated him, and when Mr. Modi won a third term in June 2024, the ruling party of Pakistan congratulated him. On 14-15 October 2024, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar visited Pakistan to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. Apart from the meetings and thanking the host, he was the first senior Indian government official to visit Pakistan in about nine years.

Certainly, Jaishankar's visit was a "start" that could further lead to the opening of Confidence Building Measures (CBM) for engagement with each other and a gradual approach to normalization of diplomatic relations and resumption of trade between India and Pakistan. India and Pakistan, especially North India, share similar cultures, cuisines, and languages due to their shared Indo-Aryan heritage. The Indian and Pakistani diaspora in many countries have strong and friendly relations.

Although China's proximity to Pakistan and investment in Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor have raised concerns in India, some in Pakistan believe the government could invite India to be a stakeholder in the corridor.

The border areas of Pakistan and India remain underdeveloped in terms of social development due to security perceptions and government priorities, but greater attention to initiatives such as the Kartarpur Corridor, religious tourism and visits to religious shrines between India and Pakistan, and easier access and smooth passage could facilitate relations.

Trade between the two countries has been severely limited since 2019. In practice, high levels of trade and increasing “indirect imports” through other countries have continued but are far below potential and could be 15–20 times higher than the “normal” trade levels before 2019.

In the meantime, a neighboring trade market for the two countries could help stabilize the economy with millions of more stable and better-quality jobs. Transit trade is also an important opportunity. What is clear is that recognizing the shift and the shift in perception can be a huge opportunity in Pakistan-India relations. It seems that by reducing barriers and normalizing trade and economic interdependence, trade can be a major contribution to making the current fragile peace more sustainable and complementary in other areas.

Normal neighborly relations require compromise on issues related to national security and territorial integrity. Both countries, along with multilateral strategic plans, have significant internal and external challenges, and more attention to the previous main peace agreements is needed to normalize relations. Also, part of a practical roadmap for the revival of relations between India and Pakistan could be inter-parliamentary dialogue, soft power channels, sports events, easing the visa regime, promoting religious tourism, and encouraging people-to-people contact.

Samyar Rostami, March 14, 2025

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