

FITS AND STARTS: ON INDIA-PAKISTAN DIALOGUE PROCESS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

After a month of moves and messages that indicated a détente, events last week appear to have slammed the brakes on the India-Pakistan dialogue process. The moves began with a ceasefire announcement at the LoC in February, followed by Indus water talks, sporting visas and other measures, including official speeches by Pakistan's top leadership pushing for regional rapprochement, and salutary messages exchanged between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Imran Khan. Despite the growing bonhomie, however, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi decided not to meet or even exchange greetings at a conference in Dushanbe last week. And then days later, Mr. Qureshi led a charge of Cabinet Ministers who opposed a move by Pakistan's Economic Coordination Committee to reopen imports of Indian cotton and sugar, arguing that it would violate Pakistan's commitments on Kashmir. Subsequently, Mr. Khan announced he was dropping the import proposal he had made in his capacity as Commerce Minister, and that ties with India would not be normalised unless the Modi government revoked its steps of August 2019, on Jammu and Kashmir and Article 370. New Delhi, which has chosen not to comment on the events of the past month, and has not denied reports that claimed India-Pakistan moves were part of a back-channel dialogue facilitated by other countries, has also made no comment on Mr. Khan's U-turn.

While such swings have been common in the India-Pakistan engagement, the present scenario poses questions. If talks are indeed under way behind the scenes, it is unclear why Pakistan's import decision was not better coordinated before being publicly announced. The move followed a speech by Pakistan's Gen. Bajwa where he stressed the need for geo-economics, trade and connectivity to be prioritised for regional prosperity. So, if it is not the all-powerful Army Chief or the 'Pakistani establishment' that is playing the "spoiler", the Khan government must identify who it is. It is significant that New Delhi has chosen not to press its advantage over the embarrassing confusion in Pakistan's stand, or react to its unworkable demand on Article 370, which has drawn India's sharp comments in the past. This might indicate that the dialogue that has reportedly been on for months has been paused and much will depend on whether any other outlooked steps, including the restoration of High Commissioners in each other's capitals and LoC trade that was suspended for security reasons in 2019, or commitments from Pakistan on cross-border terrorism, are announced next. If the nascent re-engagement is to have any chance, there must be also more clarity on what the two governments have decided to embark upon and hope to achieve from it.

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From the abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, to the landmark Ayodhya verdict, 2019 proved to be an eventful year.

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