

Engaging Naya Pakistan

The victory of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in the recent general elections in Pakistan poses both challenges and opportunities for India. The challenge would be to engage a newly minted Pakistani Prime Minister who is yet to reveal his way of conducting diplomacy. The opportunity, even so, lies in the fact that the rise of Mr. Khan will enable India to deal with the Pakistani 'deep state' more effectively.

Mr. Khan's 'victory speech' had several well-meaning and conciliatory references to India which, if logically followed up, could potentially yield long-term benefits for the two countries. But it may be unrealistic to expect much movement in bilateral ties till India's own general elections are concluded.

Despite allegations of a rigged election in Pakistan in which the army is said to have enabled Mr. Khan's victory, it is widely recognised that there was a major groundswell of support for him. The fact that his PTI left the rival Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) far behind in terms of seat share, and that the PTI, until recently a provincial party, made stunning inroads in all of Pakistan's provinces shows that the big story is also the rise of a charismatic Pakistani political leader seen as incorruptible and visionary by young voters.

More significantly, despite concerns in India, religious parties have once again failed to convert their street power into political outcomes, which goes to highlight the sheer lack of mass base for terror outfits and their affiliates in Pakistan, and the moderate nature of its polity. This is not to say that Mr. Khan has a clean record: he has been a supporter of Pakistan's blasphemy law and has in the past flirted with rightwing parties and terror outfits in Pakistan, which earned him the moniker 'Taliban Khan'.

The central Indian concern, and a legitimate one, about Mr. Khan's victory is whether he can independently navigate a sustained policy process with New Delhi. India fears that the Pakistani deep state, i.e. the army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), will decide the India policy, and Mr. Khan will merely carry it out, if he is kept in the loop at all. A related concern is that the Pakistani deep state is not keen on a dialogue process with New Delhi. While it is difficult to predict the nature of the evolving relationship between an extremely popular Mr. Khan with the Pakistani deep state, let's assume, for argument's sake, that Mr. Khan will be subservient to the Pakistan army with regard to the country's security policy. Whether that is desirable for the Pakistani state and its democracy is not a question that should detain us here.

The question that should bother us is whether Mr. Khan being a puppet in the hands of the Pakistan army is detrimental to Indian interests or not. India's grievance in regard to civil-military relations so far has been three-fold: one, the Pakistani deep state has a nefarious agenda vis-à-vis India; two, dialogue with the Pakistani political establishment has often not been successful since the Pakistani security establishment is often not on board the dialogue process; three, New Delhi's desire for peace becomes a casualty in the turf war between Pakistan's deep state and its political establishment.

Logically then, one could argue that the only way India can have a steady dialogue process with Pakistan is when there is agreement between Pakistan's deep state and its Prime Minister on what the country's India policy should be. If so, Mr. Khan's closeness to the Pakistan army should be viewed as an opportunity to have a fruitful dialogue with the Pakistani deep state without New Delhi's message to Rawalpindi getting lost in Islamabad. New Delhi, while engaged in a dialogue with Islamabad, would not need to second-guess Rawalpindi's intentions.

Does the Pakistan army desire peace with India? Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, has on several occasions spoken of the need to build peace with India, underscoring that bilateral dialogue can lead to peace and stability in the region. There is, of course, no need to take it at face value. However, if the Pakistan army proposes dialogue and if the new Prime Minister is assumed to be on board such an objective, wouldn't it suit Indian interests?

This begets more questions. Can this new-found civil-military equation in Pakistan withstand the force of Mr. Khan's personality traits and Pakistan's political dynamics in the days ahead? Will Mr. Khan's relationship with the deep state continue as expected or will his unpredictable temperament create more confusion? One would have to wait and watch.

Yet another angle that needs to be factored in while engaging Naya Pakistan is the rising regional influence of China and the further strengthening of China-Pakistan ties. Both the Pakistan army and the political class in Pakistan are upbeat about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Chinese investments in Pakistan, notwithstanding Mr. Khan's initial reservations about China. It is possible that China could pacify some of Pakistan's revisionist tendencies towards both Afghanistan and India. In Wuhan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to carry out joint projects in Afghanistan. This is perhaps the opportune time to implement them. If (and that's a big 'if') Beijing can get the Pakistan army to agree to a reconciliation process in Afghanistan, and if New Delhi and Beijing can collaborate in Afghanistan, we may witness some move towards regional stability. This would be helped by Mr. Khan's desire to improve Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

In this plausible scenario, Kashmir is likely to be the wild card. Two lessons stand out from earlier India-Pakistan negotiations: talks with Pakistan are unlikely to succeed if Kashmir continues to be a domestic challenge for India; and talks with Kashmiri separatists will not get anywhere without a parallel process with Pakistan. In other words, unless New Delhi reaches out to Kashmiri separatists and to Pakistan in parallel, a dialogue process with Pakistan is unlikely to succeed. Given that the Bharatiya Janata Party — after having pulled out of a difficult coalition with the Peoples Democratic Party in Jammu and Kashmir — is gearing up to use the Kashmir issue in the upcoming elections, there is unlikely to be much appetite in New Delhi to open a serious dialogue with Kashmiris, and Pakistan.

In any case, Mr. Modi might not want to take a chance with Pakistan at this point since a failure to show anything substantive from a peace process with Pakistan could have domestic political implications, especially if ceasefire violations and terror attacks continue to take place.

Therefore, notwithstanding the positive statements from Mr. Khan and Mr. Modi's gracious phone call to him, we might not witness much progress in bilateral ties in the short term. The interlude between the general elections in Pakistan and India is a period of extreme caution and careful domestic calculations, and hence not conducive for bold foreign policy initiatives, especially on something as fraught as India-Pakistan relations.

Happymon Jacob is Associate Professor of Disarmament Studies at JNU, New Delhi

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

END

crackIAS.com