

BEYOND WORDS: ON INDO-PAK TIES

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In the midst of the inane controversy over Punjab Minister [Navjot Singh Sidhu's presence at Pakistan](#) Prime Minister Imran Khan's swearing-in ceremony, there have been more substantive exchanges between New Delhi and Islamabad. In his first statement after the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf emerged as the single largest party, [Mr. Khan singled out India as a foreign policy relationship](#) he hoped to work on, offering to walk "two steps for every one step" that India took. Narendra Modi responded with a phone call, and they spoke of a shared vision of "peace and development". Next, the Indian High Commissioner called on Mr. Khan and presented him a cricket bat with the signatures of the Indian team members. Mr. Khan's new appointee on the Pakistan Cricket Board has said that resuming bilateral cricket is high on the leader's agenda for improving people-to-people ties. Last week, a delegation led by a Minister in Pakistan's caretaker government came to Delhi to attend Atal Bihari Vajpayee's funeral. On Sunday, Pakistan's new Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, said Mr. Khan had received a congratulatory letter from Mr. Modi calling for the two countries to pursue "constructive engagement". And on Tuesday Mr. Khan tweeted that trade and resolution of differences through dialogue are the "best way" to "uplift the people in the subcontinent". All these gestures confirm that both the Prime Ministers are at least sticking by diplomatic courtesy against the backdrop of an otherwise acrimonious relationship.

Well-chosen words, however, will not be enough. To begin with, there appears to be very little trust in any quarter of both capitals. Both leaders face political realities that could inhibit them from taking any major risks. Mr. Modi, who dealt with the Pathankot airbase attack just days after his visit to Lahore in December 2015, may well prefer to avoid such overtures, especially with Lok Sabha elections due in less than a year. Mr. Khan, who commands a thin majority in Parliament, and has frequently criticised his predecessors for close ties with India, may choose to remain conservative. Even so, the steps needed are clear. To begin with, the situation at the Line of Control urgently needs attention, and a restoration of the ceasefire would be a major move forward for both countries. Mr. Khan could earn Pakistan an economic breather if he adheres to the international Financial Action Task Force's demands on ending terror financing; he would earn more goodwill by directly addressing India's concerns on the support to terrorists in Pakistan, and those being pushed over the LoC. These actions could set up an even bolder move, no matter how unlikely it currently seems: for Mr. Modi to agree to restore the SAARC process by attending the long-delayed summit due in Islamabad this year. Much work, preferably behind the scenes, is needed if Mr. Modi and Mr. Khan hope to realise any of the objectives they have spoken of over the past month.

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