

India's relationship with Pakistan could get worse before it gets better

India and Pakistan have held no substantive talks for close to a decade even as their relations have been buffeted by one storm after another, including a string of cross-border terror attacks that put paid to efforts by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his former Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif to restore a semblance of normalcy to ties. The affair of Kulbhushan Jadhav, sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court for alleged involvement in espionage, has the potential to add to the chill that currently characterises relations, especially if there is any precipitate action by Islamabad.

Experts and diplomats on both sides have suggested several times that efforts at a breakthrough will have a greater chance of success if New Delhi and Islamabad make a conscious effort to keep dialogue separate from domestic politics. But Pakistani politicians will soon begin preparing for a crucial vote, one that is expected to see Sharif's PML-N party emerge victorious but considerably weaker than in the 2013 election. In such circumstances, hardly any Pakistani politician is likely to make a public pitch for better relations with India. It remains to be seen whether Shehbaz Sharif, being projected as the PML-N's prime ministerial candidate and who is known to be closer to the military than Nawaz Sharif, will be as committed as his elder brother to the peace process. Soon after the Pakistani polls, expected by June, Indian politicians will begin preparing for next year's general election, thereby considerably narrowing the window of opportunity for any talks.

There are several other factors that influence any dialogue or any effort to put relations on an even keel, and which have not been adequately addressed. For decades, India has been loath to hold any kind of talks with the Pakistani military establishment, which has its imprint all over the country's security and foreign policies. The civilian set-up in Pakistan remains weak despite two successful elections while the military has moved from coups to quietly pulling the levers from the background, sometimes through political proxies and sometimes in concert with the increasingly powerful judiciary. India has never come to grips with this conundrum.

The Indian government has also had a perplexing approach towards Pakistan – talking tough in public while maintaining secret contacts, the latest being the meeting of National Security Advisers in Thailand. Such a course may satisfy its domestic constituency but could make any attempt at détente harder to sell.

Then there are the jihadi groups in Pakistan that remain fully capable to carry out another Mumbai-like attack, the consequences of which would be devastating. Things could get a lot worse before they get better.

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