

A BRIDGE ACROSS THE INDIA-PAKISTAN ABYSS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

Ties between India and Pakistan are at an ebb — their lowest in two decades. The thread from this phase, as a series of events — the Kargil war (1999), the Agra Summit (2001), the attack on Parliament (2001) and Operation Parakram (2001-02) — meant a sustained period of deep hostilities, with diplomatic missions downgraded and travel routes truncated. Since 2015 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Lahore visit in the same year, the leaders of both countries have not met for talks. In mid-2018, the backchannel diplomacy between the National Security Advisers of both countries was called off by Pakistan, while in September 2018, [India called off a planned meeting](#) between the Foreign Ministers in New York. In the wake of the [Pulwama terror attack in Jammu and Kashmir](#) in February this year, [India attacked terror targets in Pakistan](#) which in turn sent [fighter jets to the border](#). Subsequently, after India moved missiles and deployed submarines, Pakistan raised a full air alert and imposed an [airspace ban that lasted till mid-July](#).

What has been disconnected from all those tensions are the [talks on the Kartarpur corridor](#). The offer from Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to open the corridor was conveyed first by Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and accepted by Mr. Modi, marking a rare moment of coordination between the two nations.

That the talks have continued through one of the most difficult years in the relationship is equally remarkable; there have been three rounds of technical-level meetings to ensure both sides complete the infrastructure needed before November 2019, the 550th anniversary of Sikhism's founder Guru Nanak.

The symbolism for pilgrims who will be able to travel from Dera Baba Nanak town in Punjab to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur just a few kilometres inside Pakistan, which are sites where Guru Nanak spent his last few years, goes well beyond the date and year. This is a route that the Guru and his followers traversed with ease for half a millennium until Partition resulted in the India-Pakistan border cutting through it. While Sikh pilgrims have been given easy access since then to Guru Nanak's birthplace at Nankana Sahib, the circuitous 200 km route to Kartarpur via Amritsar-Wagah has been off limits. The Kartarpur shrine has one of the last copies of the original Guru Granth Sahib; there are some who believe that it contains not only the wisdom of the 10 Gurus but is itself the 11th and last Guru. Giving life to the wishes of so many will also ensure political dividends in India, an aspect no government in the State or at the Centre can ignore.

Despite the rich significance of the corridor, there were many reasons for the earlier hesitation to revive the project. The Kartarpur corridor project is an issue that has been raised by India for several decades, with New Delhi's reasons for wanting the corridor clear. However, in the case of Pakistan, these have not been as transparent, with the military establishment's surprise backing only raised doubts on whether Islamabad has an ulterior motive. In a dossier handed over during the last round of talks on Kartarpur on July 14, India spelt out its apprehensions over Pakistan allowing separatist Khalistani groups, including those funded by groups based in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, to try and influence pilgrims. Of specific concern is the 'Referendum 2020' plan by the Sikhs for Justice group (banned by India).

This group has already held a series of public events in the U.S. and the U.K. demanding a 'worldwide referendum' on a separate Sikh state. The other irritant is the possible use of the corridor for drugs and arms movement; there are many routes and tunnels at the border

between the two Punjabs. The terror threat by Pakistani Punjab-based anti-India groups such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad is also a constant concern.

Agreeing to the Kartarpur corridor means the government has made an exception from a matter concerning national policy for a matter of faith. In the last few years, every avenue has been shut down from those for official, bilateral and regional (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) talks to even those for travel and tourism. Trade too has ground to a halt with cross-Line of Control (LoC) trade route suspension the latest casualty.

With such strictures in place, New Delhi's decision to embark on a course that will need regular and repeated India-Pakistan meetings is nothing short of a breach of its otherwise firm "no talks without terror ending" policy. For example, at a time when Indian and Pakistani Ministers do not even hold talks when they meet at multilateral conferences, New Delhi sent two senior Ministers to Pakistan to participate in the ground-breaking ceremony for the event. It remains to be seen who the government will send to the inauguration, and whether Mr. Modi, who has likened building the Kartarpur corridor to the fall of the Berlin wall, will grace the occasion.

With the Kartarpur exception to India's policy on Pakistan now established, it is necessary to see whether it can be built on to create a mechanism for broader conversations between India and Pakistan. The obvious extension from this would be for having other faith-based "corridors" for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh pilgrims in both countries; this would be in addition to the list of 20 shrines (15 in Pakistan, five in India) that were negotiated under the 1974 Protocol on visits to Religious Shrines.

The template that Kartarpur has given both sides is also worth considering for the format of other bilateral negotiations given that the talks have been immunised from both terror attacks and election rhetoric. The venue of the talks, at the Attari-Wagah zero point, lends itself to more successful outcomes too away from the glare of the media, without focus on arrangements for both parties. The two sides can cross over, meet for the duration of talks and return after issuing a pre-arranged joint statement.

The timing of the Kartarpur opening may also lend itself to exploring other bilateral engagements.

Ahead of the next plenary of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in October, Pakistan will remain under pressure to keep terror groups subdued. According to various reports, infiltration figures at the LoC are significantly lower (a 43% reduction since the Balakot strikes in February); officials have marked about 20 terror camps in PoK they believe have been "shut down" recently. Civilian and military casualties from ceasefire violations have also reduced. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's government, which has been buoyed by Mr. Khan's U.S. visit and by Pakistan's new-found acceptance in the international community for its role in Taliban talks, and Mr. Modi's government, which has been bolstered by its strong electoral mandate, will also be in the strongest positions politically to forge agreements.

Thus, it would be a travesty to waste the opportunity made possible by the Kartarpur corridor, and by extension, the founder of the Sikh faith himself (revered by Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan) to bring both countries back to the table for talks. The most famous story at Kartarpur is the one of the 'miracle' that Guru Nanak wrought after his death as his Hindu and Muslim followers debated late into the night whether their Guru should be cremated or buried. When they awoke, his body had vanished, replaced by flowers which they divided up. The Guru Nanak's 'samadhi' and grave were built side by side. As pilgrims across the border pay a visit in November, it should be clear what the bigger miracle is: that the Kartarpur exception has been made at all.

sahasini.h@thehindu.co.in

Support quality journalism - [Subscribe to The Hindu Digital](#)

Please enter a valid email address.

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

To know more about Ad free news reading experience and subscription [Click Here](#)

or Please whitelist our website on your Adblocker

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com