

MAKING PEACE WITH NAYA PAKISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

In this photo released by the Press Information Department, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, center, attends a briefing at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad, Pakistan, Friday, Aug. 24, 2018. A telephone call made by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to congratulate Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Khan has stirred controversy, with Washington saying it "raised the importance of Pakistan taking decisive action against all terrorists" operating in the country. Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi seen second from left. (Press Information Department, via AP)

The election of the eminent Pakistani cricketer, [Imran Khan, as Prime Minister](#) (albeit through a flawed election) has rekindled hopes among committed democrats in South Asia, especially India, that Pakistan is about to emerge into a new dawn. Also that it would bring to an end many of the travails that afflict India-Pakistan relations today.

To be optimistic about the future of democracy in Pakistan and, alongside this, an improvement in India-Pakistan relations is, no doubt, welcome. However, it needs to be laced with more than a tinge of realism, since India-Pakistan relations have witnessed several false starts over the years. A moot question at the outset is this: How far can it be said that real democracy exists in Pakistan today, even though an election process was gone through? More important, can a political neophyte turn around the situation in a country whose attempts at democracy have never been fulfilled all these years?

While hopes have been expressed that Pakistan may effect changes in the way it views relations with India, it is difficult to accept that merely because that country has a new leader who is not a politician in the usual mould, things are about to change. Democratic leaders in Pakistan, especially more recent ones like Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, have paid a heavy price whenever they sought to enlarge their democratic constituencies. They have been unable to withstand the machinations of the Pakistani 'deep state', which controls almost every single aspect of political activity in Pakistan.

Will Imran Khan's win further set back Indo-Pak ties?

For the Pakistani 'deep state', the main enemy is India. No democratically elected leader can afford to ignore this fact. Hence, India needs to assess the situation in Pakistan in somewhat greater depth, and not jump to any conclusion of better prospects in India-Pakistan relations in the immediate, or even medium, term.

No doubt, history is replete with instances of how transformational leaders, who embody particular ideas and ideologies, are able to turn around the fortunes of their countries. No one can possibly accuse Mr. Khan, however, of being a transformational leader — one who is capable of inspiring people through well-considered and carefully thought out ideas and suggestions. Hardly anyone will credit him with a single visionary idea, or articulating a new vision for Pakistan.

With regard to India-Pakistan relations, Mr. Khan has been content with reiterating hackneyed themes that every new Prime Minister or leader in Pakistan spouts at the beginning of his tenure, viz., [a desire to initiate talks with India](#), resolve differences between the two countries, improve trade relations, resolve the Kashmir conflict, and alleviate poverty in both countries. In addition, we have the usual drumbeat of views by other members of his team, stressing the need for a dialogue between the two countries to sort out mutual issues and problems.

The new Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi (of 26/11 infamy), has 'tongue-in-cheek' proposed "a continued uninterrupted dialogue" to resolve "all outstanding issues",

whatever that means. In his previous stint as Foreign Minister in the Pakistan Peoples Party regime, he had hardly endeared himself to audiences in India, and there is no reason to believe he has changed colour under the Imran Khan dispensation. Many of the other key Ministers in Mr. Khan's Cabinet are holdovers from previous administrations, quite a few being from the Pervez Musharraf period. None of this holds out much, if any, hope for an improvement in India-Pakistan relations.

It would be interesting to conjecture which constituency Mr. Khan caters to, or represents, other than himself. Only after that would it be possible to determine what our policy should be towards Pakistan, and how to deal with him. Not to do so would be the height of folly, notwithstanding the genuine desire for peace in our country, or perhaps in both countries.

India-Pakistan ties: time to reach out across the border

The circumstances under which Mr. Khan succeeded in these elections would seem to suggest that the 'deep state' in Pakistan played a not-so insignificant role in his victory, perhaps even a preponderant role. Over the years, the 'deep state' has co-opted some of the key levers of power, not excluding the judiciary, to maintain its stranglehold on Pakistan. Gone are the days when Generals like Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf openly declared their intention to seek power and take charge of the state. Today, the 'deep state' adopts more insidious means to maintain control over the levers of power.

Included in this repertoire of means and methods is choosing charismatic leaders, who have no worthwhile political base and willing to do their bidding, to front for them. In doing so, they avoid accusations of military dictatorship, and of trampling on democracy and democratic rights. It would not be the first time in Pakistan, or for that matter elsewhere in the world, that these kinds of tactics have succeeded.

Whatever may be the initial euphoria, an individual functioning in this milieu is unlikely to be able to navigate an independent path that could lead, at least a part of the way, to eventual success. In the case of Mr. Khan, he seems to have even less room to manoeuvre. To all intents and purposes, he appears to be a prisoner of the 'deep state'. India would do well to realise this at the beginning of his tenure as Prime Minister. It is much better than being lulled into a false sense of complacency.

In this context, India will need to create a framework that leads to realistic outcomes, given that it genuinely believes in peace with Pakistan. There needs to be clarity regarding short- and medium-term goals, before embarking on the ultimate objective of bettering India-Pakistan relations. Repeating past shibboleths and setting impossible goals is not the answer.

The first step should be an acknowledgement that the new government in Pakistan faces threats, from elements both within and outside the government. Furthermore, the threat to better India-Pakistan relations comes from the 'deep state' embedded within the Pakistani establishment. Given the entrenched nature of the 'deep state', Mr. Khan will be compelled to adopt what may be termed as the 'Pakistan First' approach', in which relations with India would have least priority, and the emphasis would be on better relations with China as also the U.S. and the West. In the light of this, the establishment in India should tailor its response appropriately if it hopes to succeed in the longer term.

For the present, it would perhaps be advisable for the Indian state to step back and provide greater scope for people's initiatives, strengthen the existing democratic order initiatives driven by people's groups, and enhance the constituency for peace in the subcontinent. Towards this end, it should coordinate strategies among different agencies within the government on how to enlarge the constituency for peace and liberal tendencies in both countries. The effort should also be on increasing the share of people in Pakistan who recognise the need to act responsibly, and rally the 'likeminded' who seek peaceful co-existence with India. It should involve appealing to people in Pakistan, much beyond those involved in the administration.

Only after such moves reach a certain stage, and the outlines of a 'coalition of the willing' emerges, should the establishment step in. The short message is for people's groups in India to

engage, and engage with whomsoever it is possible to in Pakistan with a view to creating a suitable climate for peace and better relations. Admittedly, there are many segments in both countries that may not be willing at present to back the move for better relations. However, there does exist a constituency for peace in both countries, especially in India, which needs to be galvanised to act.

India should also take steps to encourage the rest of the democratic world to advance, and defend, democracy in Pakistan, and implicitly improve relations with India. It means actively cultivating a constituency for collective action among civil society worldwide, going beyond mere populism and the usual range of India-Pakistan tensions. If sufficient progress is made, then the establishments on both sides could proceed to the next step.

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