

The India-Pakistan summit: a roadmap to Kashmir peace?

Gurharpal Singh

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Three Indo-Pakistan wars since 1948, and a bitter insurgency costing 60,000 lives since 1989, have failed to resolve the conflict over Kashmir. Will a three-day summit of the two states in Islamabad open the way to a just peace in the contested territory?

The talks between India and Pakistan from 16-18 February 2004 in Islamabad mark a historic opportunity to build a process leading to peace and economic development between the two rival, and nuclear-armed, states. It also reinforces a political momentum that has been building since the aftermath of the Iraq war in March-April 2003.

The dramatic announcement of the summit – to be led by the respective chief negotiators, Jalil Jilani (Pakistan) and Arun K. Singh (India) - was made at the 12th meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) on 4-6 January 2004, also in Islamabad.

The mixture of relief and expectation in the region was palpable. As recently as May 2002, the leaders of the two governments, Pervez Musharraf and Atal Behari Vajpayee, had brought their forces to the brink of armed confrontation. As the Pakistan president and Indian prime minister now pledged themselves to

“normalisation” and “confidence-building measures” in honeyed tones, the conflict over Kashmir that had shadowed the India-Pakistan relationship since partition in 1947 was at the forefront of their minds.

Vajpayee insisted that “in order to take forward and sustain the dialogue process, violence, hostility and terrorism must be prevented”; Musharraf undertook that he would “not permit any territory under Pakistan’s control to be used to support terrorism in any way”. The two leaders committed themselves to the resumption of a “composite dialogue” that will “lead to peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu & Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides”.

What lies behind this moment of hope? What are the real prospects for peace between these two “distant neighbours” with over a half-century of enmity behind them?

The route to a breakthrough

The second Gulf war in spring 2003 was a landmark. Around the time the Saddam regime fell, Vajpayee declared – during a visit to the Kashmir valley – that the war was a “warning to all states” (especially “rogue” ones), and offered the “hand of friendship” to Pakistan if it desisted in its support of cross-border terrorism.

The offer was not immediately accepted, but events in the following weeks and months seemed to sharpen its relevance. In the wake of the war, the United States exerted intense diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to suppress Islamist militants operating from within its territory; the US’s relationship with India continued to improve; and two assassination attempts by Islamic extremists on President Musharraf only narrowly failed.

Alongside these developments, there were small but perceptible signs of improvement in the relationship between the states – a significant decline in cross-border terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir; the absence of escalatory rhetoric after the August 2003 bombings in Mumbai (Bombay) that killed 52 people and injured 150; the overland passage granted to Pakistani activists attending the World Social Forum in the same city in January 2004; and (most recently) the decision that the Indian cricket team would proceed with its visit to Pakistan in March.

The announcement at Islamabad, then, took place in the midst of a climate of cautious, evolving bilateral progress and mutual confidence-building measures. In the event, the joint Musharraf-Vajpayee declaration also recommitted Pakistan and India to the agreement by the SAARC nations to introduce a common trading zone in 2006. The Indian prime minister promised nothing short of a comprehensive “future architecture of peace and prosperity for the entire South Asian region”.

Both the peace-building and the economic ambitions of the Islamabad meeting have been welcomed by nearly all interested parties to the dispute between India and Pakistan – the United Nations, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their evident support for south Asia’s development through economic integration also reinforces the dialogue’s domestic benefits to the two leaders.

Atal Behari Vajpayee hopes to use it as a significant boost in advance of national elections where his

Bharatiya Janata Party hopes to win re-election alongside its National Democratic Alliance coalition partners. Pervez Musharraf sees it as an important moment in subordinating the country’s *jihadi* elements which the Pakistan state itself nurtured in the last two decades – in the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation of the 1980s, and in Indian-controlled Jammu & Kashmir in the 1990s.

The broader national, regional and indeed global interests at stake in the India-Pakistan relationship are of course greater than the electoral and regime concerns of the two current leaders. But if the relationship is going to deliver the benefits that current moves seem to promise, the first test will be at the local level; and it is in Jammu & Kashmir – where bitter conflict and counter-insurgency between pro-independence, pro-Pakistan and Indian army forces have caused thousands of deaths – that the hardest test may come.

Jammu & Kashmir: resolution or stumbling-block?

Two signs augur well. First, Musharraf has expressed a willingness to move from the traditional Pakistani fixation with the 1948 UN resolution (the first of eighteen about the area) that demands a plebiscite on Kashmir – provided the Indian side shows similar flexibility. India’s official position is that the *whole* of Jammu & Kashmir, including Pakistan-controlled areas (*Azad* / “Free” Kashmir) and land ceded by Pakistan to China, is part of the Indian Union; but influential Indian thinkers, including leading diplomats, have long argued the need for India to accept “ground realities” – such as India’s inability either to establish the pre-1948 status quo or to legitimise its rule in the Kashmir valley where 6 million, mostly Muslim, people live under Indian control.

Second, a political process was started in Kashmir itself by the election of the regional government in September-October 2002. The ensuing dialogue involved elements in the People’s Democratic Party-led coalition; Umar Farooq of the pro-independence group, the All-party Hurriyat Conference; and Lal Krishna Advani, Indian deputy prime minister. (“The circle of sanity is widening”, said the Indian commentator Pran Chopra). A workable proposal to which leading militants and moderates in Kashmir are willing to accede could create a momentum for a negotiated peace in the long-term.

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Any such proposal would have to be multi-track – engaging Kashmiris in Pakistan, Islamabad, the Hurriyat, the Mufti administration and New Delhi, and thus marginalising the more militant elements which are determined to obstruct any deal. But even inclusiveness will not be enough; if it is to make headway, it will have to be distinguished by a new culture of peace-making, modesty and forgiveness.

There have been so many bitter disappointments for the people of the region that it is natural to be cautious. For all their “statesmanship”, neither Vajpayee nor Musharraf may command sufficient national support to creatively de-link the Kashmir question from the their respective national politics.

Here, Musharraf’s position is more precarious than Vajpayee’s, for whom resolving the Kashmir question might be presented as an honourable climax to his career. The Pakistani leader’s entry into negotiations

can more easily be depicted by his enemies as a demonstration of weakness that seeks to rescue Pakistan’s international reputation after the exposure of nuclear physicist Abdul Qadeer Khan’s exports of nuclear expertise to ‘rogue regimes’ (Iran, North Korea and Libya).

The process of dialogue, in short, has yet to develop a maturity that can demonstrably withstand being “outbid” by extremists – such as the terrorist attacks on the Indian parliament in December 2001 that triggered the military mobilisation the following month.

The stakes are high. Could it yet be that a hawkish general-turned-peacemaker and a septuagenarian voice of *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) offer the best prospects for peace in south Asia for a generation?

*Gurharpal Singh is Nadir Dinshaw chair in inter-religious relations at the University of Birmingham, England. His recent publications include *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent* (OUP, 1999). He also wrote the South Asia chapter for the *Global Corruption Report* (Transparency International, 2002).*

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