

Sustained Dialogue Process as India's Pakistan Policy: An assessment

Rohan Joshi and Pranay Kotasthane¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A prevalent view in India is that a sustained dialogue at the highest levels is the only realistic chance for peace with Pakistan. In this paper, we systematically dissect the assumptions that have resulted in this perception that dialogue will solve India's Pakistan problem.

Applying historical institutionalism, path dependency and realism, we find that the edifice of assumptions on which the dialogue process as a policy instrument rests, is on an extremely weak footing.

We assess that talks, especially at higher levels of the political spectrum have a close correlation with terror attacks by the military—jihadi complex (MJC). The paper further demonstrates that it is not even clear if Pakistan's civilian establishment -- let alone the army -- wants peace with India.

We therefore recommend that it is futile to spend cycles on trying to engage Pakistan at all costs. Only by developing and putting in place mitigation strategies can India truly hope to better insulate itself from the terror infrastructure that operates out of Pakistan with the support and patronage of that country's security establishment.

¹ Rohan Joshi and Pranay Kotasthane work with the Geostrategy Programme of The Takshashila Institution, an independent think tank on strategic affairs and public policy contributing towards building the intellectual foundations of an India that has global interests.

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CONTEXT

After PM Modi's visit to Pakistan triggered or correlated closely to a brazen terrorist attack in Pathankot, a dominant narrative in the Indian media has been that the nascent dialogue process between India and Pakistan should be sustained. Various analysts have, in different words, implied as much: a sustained dialogue is the only fitting reply to terrorist groups and to a few rogue elements inside the Pakistan establishment who wish to destabilise the peace process.

There are several problems with the point of view that sustained dialogue is the only appropriate response to negate the designs of terrorists and their sponsors in Pakistan. The edifice of assumptions on which this perception rests need to be studied, analysed and critiqued. Only then can we make a valid assessment of what talks can achieve and what they cannot.

A critique of the some dominant narratives and assumptions that inform discourse on India-Pakistan ties follows.

Assumption #1: The Pakistan Army now favours peace with India

The very first assumption is that this time around, the dominant faction of the Pakistani military establishment wants peace with India. The argument thus goes that India should not lose this opportunity and keep engaging the establishment instead of letting the terrorists hold the talks at ransom.

This argument however does not hold ground. The Pakistani security establishment has long since institutionalised hostility towards India. As Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani notes in his book *Pakistan: Beyond Mosque and Military*, projecting India as the state enemy is one of the legs of the policy tripod developed within the very first few years of Pakistan's creation (with the other two being Islam as the national unifier and U.S. as the country's provider of arms and finances). Though the last leg of the tripod is fungible, with China slowly replacing US as the financier, there is little evidence to prove that there is any revision in the first two foundational principles.

Assumption #2: Resolving the Kashmir dispute will allow India and Pakistan to live in peace with each other

This is a corollary to the above assumption and reasons that if they can resolve the Kashmir dispute, India and Pakistan can go on to live as peaceful neighbours. The argument assumes that the Kashmir dispute is essentially a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan. This assumption, in turn, has led to attempts to manage the dispute by suggesting that Pakistan's hostility towards India can be tempered through territorial settlements or concessions.

The scholar TV Paul sheds light on Pakistani strategic thinking by citing from the Pakistan Army's 1994 Green Book, which argues that "'the existence and survival of Pakistan depend upon complete implementation of Islamic ideology in true sense'...and that it is the duty of the army to protect not only territorial boundaries, but also the 'ideological frontiers to which the country owes its existence.'"²

Put in another way, Pakistan sees itself as contesting not only physical or territorial space with India, but also ideological frontiers. It is not what India possesses, rather than what India is, that agitates Pakistan. Thus, resolving Jammu and Kashmir territorially, however daunting and improbable a proposition in and of itself, will unlikely diminish Pakistan's hostility towards India.

Assumption #3: Pakistan can be brought to target militants of all hues and colours (the Peshawar tragedy has altered its calculus)

This assumption is that the Pakistan Army now no longer supports militant groups, following a decade of insurgent and terrorist violence in Pakistan culminating in the Peshawar tragedy. Some analysts point to the Pakistan Army's targeting of the TTP along the Durand Line. However, a closer examination reveals gaps in Pakistan's alleged counter-terrorism campaign. The *Zarb-e-Azb*, Pakistan's combing operation against terrorists, has largely been limited to action against groups perceived to be targeting the Pakistani army and state (such as groups like the TTP).

Even in cases where action has been taken against the TTP, a majority of its leadership has simply been pushed to the other side of the Durand Line. The *Zarb-e-Azb* and the National Action Plan, while professing to act against terrorist groups of all hues and colours, have done little to target India-specific terrorist groups in the Punjab and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Indeed, Pakistani officials do not even accept that the *Jamaat ud-Dawa* is a terrorist organisation, describing it instead as a charity (a position upheld even by Pakistan's Supreme Court)³. Thus, Pakistan's apparent new desire to counter terrorism is not only selective and ineffective, but also duplicitous.

² T.V. Paul, *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*, page 76, Oxford University Press, 2014

³ Geetanjali Rai, *Jamaat-ud-Dawaa is a philanthropic organisation, says Pak envoy Abdul Basit*, *India Today*, October 30, 2015

Assumption #4: Terrorist groups are only loosely associated to some handlers in the Pakistan Army while a large section of the army wants peace with India

Another argument in the favour of talks is that talking to Pakistan further marginalises the rogue elements within the army establishment that have links with the jihadis. As we talk more, the saner elements of the Pakistani army will feel encouraged, while the fringe elements will weaken. A variant of this argument suggests that the Pakistan army is now on board for talking peace with India, but the ISI might throw a spanner in the works. An article in Pakistan's daily *The Nation*, for example, suggests that the problem in Pakistan is that ISI is running its own agenda as opposed to the army chief's⁴.

The argument holds no water because the Director-General of the ISI, while constitutionally reporting to the prime minister of Pakistan, draws his power and for all intents and purposes reports to Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS). Indeed, it is the COAS who recommends the appointments of the ISI's Directors-General, and any suggestion that the ISI pursues an agenda independent of the Pakistan Army cannot be given much credence.

Further, these arguments ignore the fact that what exists in Pakistan is a military-jihadi complex (MJC): a dynamic matrix of military, militant, radical Islamist and socio-political-economic structures that pursues a set of domestic and foreign policies to ensure its own survival and relative dominance. As a sociological concept, this complex has developed its own set of norms and values, and has an existence beyond the wishes and intentions of powerful individuals. The defining value of this complex is that reconciliation with India is detrimental to its interests and survival. This explains why previous negotiations, however close they might have been to a solution, have failed or are bound to fail—the complex strikes back whenever it feels threatened. Attempting to establish plausible deniability under the guise of “rogue” elements is a well-rehearsed narrative for the Pakistani MJC. If the world was initially made to believe that not all terrorists were after all “bad,” we are now witnessing a new variant of this deception: that even within the Pakistani establishment, there exists a “good” army and a “bad” army.

Assumption #5: Pakistan's civilian leaders desire peace with India (but are held back by the army)

The proposition that Pakistan's civilian leaders, in general, desire peace with India but are held back by the army, is itself not self-evident. While Pakistani leaders (like Nawaz Sharif and Pakistan People's Party President Asif Ali Zardari) have made statements in support of better relations with India, they have also supported and implemented policy hostile towards India in order to consolidate their own political space.

⁴ Gul Bukhari, *The boyzes*, *The Nation*, December 27, 2015

It was during Benazir Bhutto's second term in office that her government diplomatically internationalised the Kashmir conflict (contravening the 1972 Shimla Agreement between her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Indira Gandhi) and ramped up aid to militant groups in Kashmir, matching material support with rhetorical flourish. Ms. Bhutto, for example, vowed to prosecute a "thousand-year war" against India while hysterically demanding "azadi, azadi!" for 'oppressed' Kashmiris in a speech in Lahore in 1990.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto himself was the chief architect of the 1965 war with India and of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program (promising in an interview in 1965 that Pakistan would "eat grass" if it needed to, but would build a bomb). Thus there is little evidence to prove that Pakistan's civilian leadership is more amenable to a peaceful relationship with India.

Assumption #6: Pakistan's civilian leaders can (or want) to curb India-specific terror groups

Nawaz Sharif is reported to have told U.S. President Barack Obama during the former's visit to Washington, D.C. in October 2015 that his government would go after Lashkar-e-Taiba. Mr. Zardari, President of Pakistan at the time of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, also promised action against LeT's leader, Hafiz Saeed⁵. Yet, no discernable action against India-specific groups has been taken by Pakistan, apart from occasional temporary pressure against such groups.

In reality, most political parties in Pakistan have historically allied with militant groups for political gain. This is particularly true in the case of Nawaz Sharif and his party, the PML-N, whose rise to fame can be traced to the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), a brainchild of former ISI chief Lt. Gen. Hameed Gul and composed of right-wing coalition parties aimed at challenging the Benazir Bhutto government in 1988.

Through the years, the PML-N has had arrangements with the proscribed Deobandi militant group Ahl-e-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat (ASWJ) for electoral seats in the province of Punjab⁶. The Punjab government, under Nawaz Sharif's brother, Shahbaz Sharif, funds Jamaat ud-Dawa (the PML-N transferred approximately \$1 million to JuD in 2013-2014⁷), while Saleem Zia, the Central Vice President of the PML-N, continues to attend and address JuD's anti-India rallies.

⁵ Zardari promises action against Hafiz Saeed, *Times Now*, September 18, 2009

⁶ Amir Mir, *Talibanisation of Pakistan from 9/11 To 26/11 and beyond*, *Pentagon Press*, 2010

⁷ Pakistan's Punjab Government allocates funds for JuD centre, *The Hindu*, June 18, 2013

CONCLUSION

Talks, especially at higher levels of the political spectrum have a close correlation with terror attacks by the MJC. The Modi government appears desirous of pressing forward with a bold initiative towards Pakistan, but it must realise that talking to Pakistan is no guarantee against terrorism, just as not talking to Pakistan cannot ensure India of a terror-free environment. For Pakistan, the use of terrorism is not merely an ephemeral tactic, but a strategic choice towards which it has directed considerable resources of the state and augmented capabilities over the course of decades.

The fact remains that Pakistan is not one geopolitical entity, but two: the putative state (represented by the civilian government), and the military—jihadi complex that has captured the “commanding heights” of power. The inability to understand this duality of Pakistan has led to misplaced expectations, confounding outcomes and failed policies by states and international governments alike.

As this paper demonstrates, it is not even clear if Pakistan’s civilian establishment -- let alone the army -- wants peace with India. It is therefore futile to spend cycles on trying to engage Pakistan at all costs. Only by developing and putting in place mitigation strategies can India truly hope to better insulate itself from the terror infrastructure that operates out of Pakistan with the support and patronage of that country’s security establishment. These mitigation strategies will require India to muster resources at its disposal (including political, diplomatic, economic and military) and channelise them much more effectively to both insulate the country and impose costs when transgressions occur.

More broadly, Mr Modi has commendably brought dynamism and personal attention to foreign policy, but has unfortunately risked political capital on an issue -- a peace process with Pakistan -- that he ought not to have. Going forward, India is better served by leaving the handling of Pakistan policy to no higher a level than the national security advisor. Whether it is pursuing dialogue or its opposite, it ought to limit engagements to civil servants and diplomats. Ultimately, India is better off putting grand rapprochement with Pakistan on the back burner, while expending available political capital to launch economic reforms and get the country onto the bullet train to prosperity.