

India-Pakistan talks hold out the promise of a Kashmiri bus service

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In an effort to restart stalled bilateral talks, the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan agreed to establish transport links and strengthen diplomatic ties between the two countries at a meeting in Islamabad on February 16. The most significant outcome was a proposal to commence a bus service between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar—respectively, in the Pakistan- and Indian-controlled sections of Kashmir.

If the bus service is actually established, it will be the first time in decades that people can travel across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Kashmir. Many Kashmiris greeted the decision with enthusiasm. Previously they have had to make long, arduous and costly trips, in some cases just to visit friends and relatives in villages that they can see across the LoC.

Muhammad Iqbal Awan, who left Indian-controlled Kashmir, told Reuters, “I am overwhelmed that after a long 15 years of separation from my dear ones, I will be able to meet them.” Khalid Dar, an electricity department employee, told Associated Press: “It’s great. Now I will travel to the Indian portion of Kashmir to see my relatives. I never imagined the two countries could reach such a decision.”

The service is due to begin in early April. The road between the two cities is in a state of disrepair and has been mined by the Indian and Pakistani militaries. The most serious obstacle, however, is the political minefield that such a bus service presents. After two wars and more than half a century of bitter antagonisms over Kashmir, neither side is prepared to make any major concession.

India first mooted the proposal for a Kashmiri bus route in 2003 as part of efforts to start negotiations. The two countries had come to the brink of war in 2002. More than a million troops backed by tanks, warplanes and missiles were mobilised following an attack by armed Kashmiri militants on the Indian parliament in December 2001. Tensions only eased under strong international pressure, particularly from the US and Britain, which, in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq invasion, were keen to defuse a crisis on the Indian subcontinent.

Negotiations on the bus service dragged on over the nature of the travel documents to be carried by bus travellers. While the issue appears to be trivial, in fact it goes to the heart of the dispute over Kashmir. Pakistan has always opposed the division of Kashmir, insisting on a UN-supervised plebiscite of Kashmiris to decide the region’s future. Islamabad opposed Indian demands for passengers to carry passports and visas, claiming this would be a de facto recognition of the LoC as an international border.

A compromise was eventually reached with India agreeing to the use of special travel permits issued by authorities in Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. Other decisions reached at the Islamabad meeting included the reopening of a rail link between Sindh Province in Pakistan and Rajasthan in India; a bus service between the Pakistani city of Lahore and Amritsar in India; and the establishment of an Indian consulate in Karachi and a Pakistani consulate in Bombay.

Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Khursheed Kasuri announced the agreements at a joint press conference. The Indian minister enthusiastically declared: “We have come a long way over the past year or so. I’m convinced that cooperation between the two sides is not just a desire and an objective, it is today’s context and imperative”. Kasuri more cautiously added: “Both India and Pakistan have decided to show some kind of flexibility to save the peace process”.

For all the diplomatic language, relations between the two sides remained frosty. The joint statement was restricted to just three sentences on the Kashmiri bus service. In a separate statement, Kasuri reiterated Pakistani concerns that the “core issue of [Indian-controlled] Jammu and Kashmir” had to be addressed in accord “with the aspirations of the Kashmir people.” Singh repeated India’s demand that talks be “free from terrorism and violence”—in other words, for Pakistan to clamp down on armed Islamic militants opposed to Indian control of Kashmir.

Kasuri’s comment about needing “to save the peace process” underscored the continuing tensions and the failure of talks to produce any substantive agreement. The

negotiations were initiated in 2003 when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led coalition was in power in India. But the process remained on hold in the lead-up to general elections last April.

Following the defeat of the BJP, the new Congress-led government made no immediate move to restart talks. Natwar Singh effectively poured cold water on any negotiations by declaring that the Simla Agreement should be the model for any resolution of the Kashmir dispute. The Simla Agreement, signed after Pakistan's humiliating defeat in its 1971 war with India, pointedly omits any reference to Pakistan's key demand for a plebiscite in Kashmir.

Once again, behind the scenes, Washington pushed the two countries towards talks. The US has growing economic and strategic interests on the Indian subcontinent. Not only is India a focus for US investors but both countries were useful allies in the US occupation of Afghanistan and are regarded as valuable assets in furthering US strategic ambitions in the region.

Formal discussions took place last June, but did not get very far. Kasuri and Singh met in September and Musharraf held talks in New York with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the same month. But no agreement, even on marginal issues, emerged.

A sharp dispute subsequently erupted over India's construction of the Baglihar Dam which Pakistan claims is in violation of the 1960 Indus Water Treaty allocating water from rivers that originate in India but flow into Pakistan. In January, each side accused the other of violating the ceasefire along the LoC.

There are powerful economic reasons for the two countries to end their long-running conflict. Pakistani businesses are keen to capitalise on the foreign investment flowing into India, in the IT sector in particular. India is seeking to expand its economic influence, markets and access to raw materials on the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

During his meeting with Kasuri last month, Singh for the first time indicated that India was prepared to consider an agreement on the building of a gas pipeline from Iran through Pakistan to India independently of other economic issues. Previously New Delhi has linked the pipeline to the demand for broader trade and economic concessions.

Such a pipeline has obvious economic benefits for both sides. India needs access to gas and oil and a pipeline through Pakistan is far cheaper than the alternatives: either an undersea pipeline or shipping. Pakistan stands to gain \$150-200 million in annual transit fees from the pipeline, as well as gaining access to gas for its own needs. The obvious precondition is the absence of military conflict.

There are, however, powerful political forces that militate

against any enduring settlement. Ever since formal independence and the partition of the subcontinent in 1948, governments in both India and Pakistan have relied on stoking up communalism to divide the working class and maintain themselves in power. Kashmir has been central to nationalist demagoguery employed in both countries. The reaction of opposition parties and groups to the announcement of a trans-Kashmiri bus service is a case in point.

In India, Hindu supremacists denounced the decision as a treasonous concession to Pakistan that would allow "terrorists" to enter Jammu and Kashmir. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) spokesman Ram Madhay declared that allowing people to travel on entry permits "virtually amounts to endorsing Pakistan's claim on Kashmir." Senior BJP leader Jaswant Singh frothed: "If passport and visas have been done away with, why is there fencing along the LoC and deployment of security forces."

In Pakistan, Islamic extremists condemned the arrangement as a betrayal of the Kashmiri struggle. "It is tantamount to betraying the blood of the mujahedeen [holy warriors] of Kashmir," a spokesman for Jaish-e-Mohammed declared. "This will weaken the idea of Kashmir uniting with Pakistan." A Hizbul Mujahedeen leader made similar remarks.

Neither Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf nor Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh is in a strong political position. Musharraf is already under pressure over his support for the US intervention in Afghanistan. Both leaders face hostility over the impact of their economic policies on living standards. The knee-jerk reaction of politicians in India and Pakistan to political difficulties is to whip up nationalist and communal tensions. In that event, the current "composite dialogue" between the two countries, along with the Kashmiri bus services and other token "goodwill gestures", will be the first casualties.



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