

# India and Pakistan to resume long-stalled peace dialogue

Deepal Jayasekera  
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Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and his Indian counterpart S.M. Krishna held a 25-minute telephone conversation Tuesday during which they agreed to a series of steps aimed at reviving a comprehensive peace dialogue between their two countries, which have been bitter rivals since the 1947 communal partition of South Asia.

Krishna accepted Qureshi's invitation to visit Islamabad July 15. The two also decided that their foreign secretaries will meet at the end of next month to prepare the agenda for their meeting. They further agreed that Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram and Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik will hold discussions on the sidelines of a forthcoming meeting of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) interior ministers about increased cooperation in suppressing "terrorism."

Tuesday's telephone conversation arose from an April 29 meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani on the sidelines of a SAARC summit in the Bhutan capital, Thimpu. At that meeting, Manmohan Singh and Gilani agreed to resume bilateral negotiations, while putting aside a dispute over whether these negotiations would constitute resumption of the frozen "Composite Peace Dialogue" or not.

The Composite Peace Dialogue was initiated in early 2004 in the wake of a war crisis that saw India mobilize close to a million troops on its border with Pakistan for 10 months in 2001-2. It was suspended by India following the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, for which New Delhi has held Pakistani authorities responsible because the attackers came by boat from Pakistan.

India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government insisted that the dialogue would not be resumed unless and until Islamabad suppressed anti-Indian militias active on its soil, including those involved in the insurgency in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.

To this day India insists that Islamabad has not done enough to suppress the anti-Indian militias. On Wednesday, Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony claimed "more than 40 terror camps are working across the border."

But in late January, India signaled it was ready to hold talks with Islamabad. An initial meeting was held between Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir and Indian External Affairs Secretary Nirupama Rao in February. However, India resisted Pakistan's demand that the Composite Peace Dialogue be resumed, suggesting Pakistan had yet to do enough to meet Indian

demands concerning the suppression of Kashmiri and anti-Indian Islamist insurgent groups, and the fate of further talks remained in limbo for the next two months.

Undoubtedly, a factor behind the UPA government's reluctance to cede to Pakistan's request for resumption of the composite dialogue was fear that it would be attacked by India's official opposition, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, for "appeasing" Pakistan. Indeed, the BJP has denounced the government's recent decision to hold comprehensive talks with Islamabad.

Ultimately, Islamabad and New Delhi decided not to stand on formalities and have agreed to hold comprehensive discussions on their complex and tension-fraught bilateral relationship, while foregoing the term "Composite Peace Dialogue".

Islamabad is insisting that there be substantive discussions on Kashmir, which it has claimed forms an integral part of Pakistan since partition in 1947. But New Delhi, which confronts a host of separatist insurgencies, has long insisted that its borders, including the current Line of Control that divides Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir, are inviolable. It has angrily dismissed Pakistan's criticisms of the numerous human rights abuses Indian security forces have committed in bloodily suppressing the insurgency that erupted in 1989 in response to the central government's fixing of the 1987 elections.

Another major dispute between the two countries concerns the allocation of the waters of the Indus Valley watershed. Six rivers that irrigate Pakistan's Punjab province, the country's agricultural heartland and home to more than half of its population, originate in India. In 1960, the two countries signed the Indus River Treaty so as to divide the limited water resources, but Islamabad accuses India of violating the treaty by not providing information about water levels and its plans to build new dams. Islamabad has asked for international arbitration of its dispute with New Delhi over the Kishanganga Hydropower Project.

One of the driest countries in the world, Pakistan faces a growing water crisis due to climate change and population growth.

Although the two countries are bound together by history, geography and culture and tens of millions of Indians and Pakistanis share a common mother tongue, total bilateral trade between the two countries amounts to no more than a few billion dollars per year.

A key, if not the main, factor in the resumption of talks has been pressure from the United States. In March, the *Wall Street Journal*

revealed that US President Barack Obama had issued a secret presidential directive in late December “to intensify American diplomacy aimed at easing tensions between India and Pakistan, asserting that without detente between the two rivals, the administration’s efforts to win Pakistani cooperation in Afghanistan would suffer.”

Afghanistan and the Afghan War have become a major and increasing source of geopolitical tension between South Asia’s nuclear-armed powers.

Pakistan, which became deeply involved in Afghan affairs in the 1980s when it served as the conduit for US arms for the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahedeen, resents and fears India’s growing ties to Kabul. With Washington’s encouragement, India has emerged as one of Afghanistan’s largest foreign aid donors and has undertaken several major infrastructure projects. These include building a highway that connects Iran to Afghanistan’s national ring-road highway and that can serve as a way for Indian goods to by-pass a Pakistani embargo on land trade between India and Afghanistan. Islamabad has repeatedly charged that New Delhi has used Afghanistan to funnel support to anti-government rebels in Baluchistan, Pakistan’s impoverished western-most province.

New Delhi, for its part, has been very apprehensive that Obama will downgrade Washington’s relations with New Delhi, in pursuit of securing Pakistani support in the Afghan war and Chinese help in dealing with the world financial and economic crisis.

The Indian government’s reaction to the Mumbai terrorist attack—its insistence that Pakistan was to blame and that the attack proved that Pakistan is the centre of world terrorism—was in part a response to its apprehensions about Obama’s intentions. India’s elite was aghast when during the 2008 presidential election campaign Obama and some of his advisors suggested that in return for securing a greater Pakistani role in suppressing the Taliban, the US should consider helping Pakistan resolve its dispute with India over Kashmir.

The past 18 months have been fraught with tensions between Washington and Islamabad, as the Obama administration has expanded the Afghan war with the aim of stabilizing a pro-US regime in Kabul and thereby freeing US forces for action elsewhere. The US has threatened and bullied Pakistan into mounting major military offensives aimed at suppressing Taliban-aligned groups in the country’s Pashtun-speaking Afghan border regions, although this has caused untold hardship for the Pakistani people and plunged much of the country into civil war. At the same time, Washington has offered Islamabad various carrots, including increased economic and military aid and initiated a strategic dialogue. As in the past, the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie is seeking to leverage the US military and logistical dependence on Pakistan in the Afghan war to secure riches and geopolitical advantage. In particular, Islamabad hopes, due to its longstanding ties to the Taliban (it helped propel it to power in the mid-1990s), to be able to play a major role in configuring a new government in Kabul that incorporates sections of the anti-US forces after they have been “softened up” though Obama’s “Afghan surge.”

New Delhi, meanwhile, is concerned that it is being squeezed out of Afghanistan and more fundamentally that Washington is backing off from the “global strategic” Indo-US partnership that

was cemented under George W. Bush’s administration. The Obama administration has vigorously denied this. As proof it has pointed to its support for implementing the Indo-US nuclear accord, which grants India a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime, allowing it to purchase nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology although it developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Pakistan has vigorously denounced the Indo-US nuclear accord, charging that it will allow India to focus its indigenous nuclear program on its nuclear arsenal and warning that it will fuel a South Asian arms race.

In reality, the US is caught between the compulsions of its immediate geopolitical objectives and its long-term strategy. It vitally needs Islamabad’s cooperation to secure its objectives in the Afghan War, but from a longer-term perspective it views New Delhi as the real prize, viewing India as a crucial counterweight to a rising China and a partner in policing the Indian Ocean.

Islamabad is very well aware of this dynamic, as well as the ever-widening gap in economic and geopolitical power between it and New Delhi. As a result, it is all the more anxious and driven.

The US wants and needs a lessening of Indo-Pakistani tensions. But its predatory drive to assert its position in Asia continuously upsets the balance between them. Moreover, its desire for improved relations between Islamabad and New Delhi is subordinate to other predatory ambitions.

When the Indo-Pakistani peace dialogue was initiated, a major initiative that was intended to underpin it was the construction of an Iran-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline. But Washington has vigorously opposed the scheme, as it would cut across its economic war against Iran.



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