**A road to nowhere?**

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November 17, 2022

Following the Bharatiya Jana­ta Party’s (BJP) decision to unilaterally revoke Kashmir’s semi-autonomous status in August 2019, Pakistan downgrad­ed diplomatic ties with In­dia and suspended bilater­al trade. However, despite tensions, both sides quiet­ly engaged in backdoor di­plomacy at the National Se­curity Advisors’ level, which paved the way for the resto­ration of the Line of Control (LOC) ceasefire in February 2021. Since its restoration, the LOC truce has held and the ceasefire violations have de­clined from 5,100 in 2020 to zero in 2021. Likewise, the backchannel ef­forts to restore bilateral trade also made headway. In March 2021, Im­ran Khan’s government agreed to re­sume the import of cotton and sug­ar from India but then backtracked fearing public backlash.

When Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif was sworn in after Khan’s removal in a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in April, he ex­pressed the desire of forging “per­manent peace” with India. Indi­an Prime Minister Narendra Modi was one of the first leaders to felic­itate Sharif on becoming the prime minister. Separately, Pakistan’s For­eign Minister Bilawal Bhutto was also willing to engage so long as In­dia showed “sincerity of purpose.” However, the Indo-Pak backchannel has hit a dead-end for two reasons. First, the Pakistan Army’s ongoing leadership transition, prevailing po­litical uncertainty in the country, and general elections which are due in 2023. Second, both sides are un­willing to show flexibility in their maximalist positions. For instance, Pakistan wants India to take some steps to reverse the August 2019 ac­tions in Kashmir, while Delhi wants Islamabad to resume trade first.

[Chiniot: Two killed as dumper runs over motorcycle](https://www.nation.com.pk/17-Nov-2022/chiniot-two-killed-as-dumper-runs-over-motorcycle)

India also tried to further harden its position on Kashmir by planning the September 2023 G20 Summit in Srinagar but then backtracked due to the unwillingness of some foreign leaders to participate. The Indian move did not go down well with Pak­istan. The resultant friction prevent­ed the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers from interacting with each other on the sidelines of the Shang­hai Cooperation Organization sum­mit held in Tashkent in September.

Though the India-Pakistan back­channel negotiations have hit a dead end, Track-II diplomacy between both sides is continuing. In 2022, retired Indian and Pakistani diplo­mats, former security personnel, and intelligence officials met four times for Track-II talks in Bangkok, Mus­cat, and London. The last round of the India-Pakistan Track-II was held in Oman on September 17-18 where delegates from both sides participat­ed in the South Asia Security Con­ference. The event was co-organ­ised by the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), London, and the Near East South Asia Centre of the National Defence University, US. During the conference’s various “off the record” sessions held behind closed doors, both sides engaged in extensive discussions on terrorism, Kashmir, and the normalisation of trade. However, the main focus of the conference was exploring the possi­bility of resuming the Indo-Pak talks.

[Pakistan reports 57 coronavirus cases, one death in 24 hours](https://www.nation.com.pk/17-Nov-2022/pakistan-reports-57-coronavirus-cases-one-death-in-24-hours)

Indian External Affairs Ministry’s Spokesperson for Pakistan, Afghan­istan, and Iran JP Singh, and two former intelligence officials partic­ipated in the South Asia Security Conference. From Pakistan, former foreign secretary Jalil Abbas Jilani, the special representative for Af­ghanistan Muhammad Sadiq Khan, and Brigadier Zulfiqar Ali Bhatti, the director of strategic communication in the Inter-Services Intelligence participated in the conference.

The impasse over Kashmir is the main stumbling block in the resump­tion of dialogue, trade, and diplomat­ic ties. The hostile public opinion on both sides of Kashmir is holding the leadership hostage to show any flex­ibility. Any concession from Pakistan to India concerning the August 2019 developments will be considered a sellout by the Pakistani public opin­ion. Likewise, if the BJP government shows any leniency, its right-wing Hindu nationalist base will view it as an act of great betrayal. In a way, both sides have become prisoners of their rhetoric and finding it diffi­cult to climb down from their stat­ed maximalist positions. Otherwise, in the aftermath of the devastating monsoon flood causing $30 billion in damages to Pakistan’s beleaguered economy, there was serious contem­plation on the Pakistani side to im­port medicines from India to cope with water-borne diseases. Similarly, Pakistan also considered importing cheap food items from India to re­duce the exorbitantly high food pric­es in the aftermath of floods. How­ever, Pakistan shelved both plans fearing a serious public backlash.

[PTI long march: ‘Imran Khan to unveil future strategy on Saturday’](https://www.nation.com.pk/17-Nov-2022/pti-long-march-imran-khan-to-unveil-future-strategy-on-saturday)

Irrespective of the current dead­lock, the back channel has played a pivotal role in the restoration of the LOC ceasefire in February 2021. The current improved security at­mosphere between India and Pak­istan is the outcome of continued backchannel contacts. In South Asia’s volatile strategic environ­ment where one miscalculation can result in a war, no one can deny the importance of backchannel. There­fore, India and Pakistan should con­tinue exploring options for moving forward from the current deadlock in the backchannels.

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