**New engagement**

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WITH spring comes thaw. Recent tentative steps towards improving India-Pakistan relations are welcome. It has been two months since the ceasefire announcement, and several weeks since the Indus Water Commission met. Confirmation of the UAE`s mediating role implies that the process has legs. This should be a relief for our conflictprone region.

Against the backdrop of worsening US-China relations, the India-Pakistan rivalry seemed on track to deepen. China sees strategic value to CPEC, and the initiative, despite recent setbacks, is set to be Pakistan`s economic backbone. India and the US, meanwhile, are enjoying unprecedentedly close bilateral relations, fuelled further by New Delhi`s membership of the Quad the strategic partnership between the US, India, Japan and Australia, with an eye to countering Chinese influence. Add to that the prolonged military stand-off between India and China following clashes in the Galwan Valley last June, and the recent detente seems even more unexpected.

There are some who argue an IndiaPakistan puppet show in the context of broader US-China tensions is, perversely, a route to stability. The argument is that the two powers have too much at stake to risk a proxy war, and that Beijing and Washington would apply pressure as needed on Islamabad and New Delhi, respectively, to prevent conflicts from escalating. But for neighbours who share borders and harbour nuclear arsenals, it`s more complicated.

Our increasingly multipolar world offers new opportunities for Pakistan and India to engage in dialogue and strengthen economic ties. It makes sense that the UAE has brokered the latest round of backchannel engagement. Gulf states are pursuing parallel engagement policies with Pakistan and India with less qualms than the US, for example, which has taken a zero-sum approach to balancing ties. Other countries such as Russia are also pursuing strategies of simultaneous engagement, driven by areas of mutual interest, and proportionate to Pakistan`s and India`s economies and strategic priorities. Over time, this will mean that there are more international actors invested in, and empowered to, bring Islamabad and New Delhi to the negotiating table.

News of the US`s imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan also means that Pakistan`s western border will and should be Islamabad`s priority. Much has already been written about the likely spillover effect of a return to power for the Afghan Taliban, including the potential resurgence of the Pakistan Taliban. Pakistan does not need this scenario to become more precarious with a hostile Indian military or strategic presenceramping up in Afghanistan and fuelling a regional proxy war. Better ties between Pakistan and India will hopefully create more opportunities for collaboration, resulting in a better outcome for the Afghans and the region.

Similarly, geopolitical developments with regard to Iran including US efforts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, can be reframed as another opportunity to incentivise normalisation of India-Pakistan ties. Iran is one subject on which Pakistan finds itself at odds with its Gulf allies because of domestic security and economic concerns, particularly fears of sectarian conflict. India for its part sees Iran as a key economic partner. To date, Iran`s role in the India-Pakistan dynamic has only accelerated the rivalry, especially with Chabahar being pitted as an alternative to Gwadar. But both countries` interests in better economic ties with West and Central Asia should be cast as another opportunity for regional integration.

Pakistan`s new geo-economic push cannot work without stable ties with India, as hintedat by both Prime Minister Imran Khan and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa. A 2018 World Bank study estimated that the two countriesare missing out on $37 billion in trade due to tariffs and non-existent connective infrastructure. Pal(istan`s aspirations of being a connectivity hub also make more sense if it can serve as a conduit for Indian goods into Central Asia and Europe.

Recent baby steps acknowledge this, but may yet be quashed by big challenges. The key issue is Kashmir. New Delhi is unlikely to change its post-Article 370 stance, while Pakistan will, at minimum, continue to call for demilitarisation, provisions for self-governance and some redressal of rampant humanrightsviolationsinoccupiedKashmir, especially since 2019. As these entrenched differences resurface, India`s historic reluctance for third-party involvement will also 1(ick in, limiting the extent to which the growing number of interested international actors can sway outcomes.

The 21st century`s greatest challenges have no interest in borders or petty politicking. Pandemics, climate change, water scarcity and food insecurity can only be tackled collaboratively. Perhaps this new truth will add fresh impetus to Islamabad`s and New Delhi`s latest engagement. The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

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