**Rethinking Indo-Pak Relations**

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The emergence of artificial technology (AI) has multiplied the potential risks of India and Pakistan hostilities, essentially related to the nuclear environment. Pakistan always conveys its willingness to resume the process of further normalization of bilateral relations with India; however, expresses a precondition for India to reverse its decision of August 5, 2019, which revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. Currently, it appears that India lacks the determination and desire to initiate any form of meaningful diplomatic interaction with Pakistan. It gives the impression that there are limited possibilities for a meaningful discussion regarding measures to reduce the associated risks attributed to Indo-Pak animosity. A small spark on either side can cause a huge inferno for the region as a whole. Therefore, the global community must strive towards resolving Indo-Pak controversies and disputes through dialogue and mutual understanding. There exist several confidence-building measures; however, their implementation has been only partially adhered to. In a nutshell, peace is the sole viable option in the prevailing global and regional environment.

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The India-Pakistan border is one of the most militarised international boundaries in the world. The Kashmir remains a contentious topic between India and Pakistan, with both countries having divergent claims. Despite numerous attempts at resolution, the conflict remains unsettled, leading to tension between the two nuclear nations. The legitimate advocacy for a plebiscite in Kashmir has always been met with disapproval from the radical political elite and policymakers of India. Following the partition of the subcontinent on religious grounds, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, recognised that the Kashmir issue will lead to unending conflict and offered a no-war pact to Pakistan. In response, Pakistan’s Prime Minister at the time, Liaquat Ali Khan, wrote that a no-war pact would only be meaningful if a formula for a fair settlement of disputes could be agreed upon to prevent from festering and leading to war. Only through mutual understanding and cooperation can the region achieve lasting peace and stability.

The Simla Agreement, signed in 1972, underscored the importance of resolving disputes through bilateral means. In line with this, India and Pakistan engaged in a series of talks in August 1972, July 1973, August 1973, and April 1974 to facilitate the normalization process. During this period, Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, extended an offer of mutually balanced force reduction aimed at reducing the military presence of both nations fairly and equitably. It is worth noting that in 1981, General Zia-ul-Haq made a noteworthy gesture by offering a no-war pact to India. However, India rejected the offer, citing Pakistan’s preparation for war with American military equipment. Despite this setback, the future governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were eager to improve bilateral ties and continued to work towards enhancing political and diplomatic relations with India.

A million-dollar question is, how long can Pakistan and India sustain their belligerence? It is a query that has been lingering for quite some time now. While reiterating the desire to resolve the matter may be a step forward, concrete actions must be required on the core issues for ‘lasting peace’ to dilute the mistrust that has long branded the relationship between the two neighbouring nations. Additionally, an agreement on the reduction of episodes that could potentially lead to a nuclear threshold is of paramount importance. Despite the challenging and gruelling journey towards achieving peace between Pakistan and India, it stands imperative for both countries to persevere with diplomatic negotiations. One example of this is the Wullar barrage issue, which should be relatively easy to resolve. India’s control of the Jhelum River has severe consequences for Pakistan. In the event of war, India would have an advantage over the Pakistan Army by controlling mobility by inundating the battlefield or closing the barrage gates.

The rhetoric by political parties usually creates a toxic atmosphere of hatred, fueled by misperceptions and preconceived notions. This is often perpetuated by the radical elements on both sides of the divide as well as by the selected vested interest. To dispel these myths and promote understanding, it is essential to establish mechanisms that facilitate dialogues, bilateral trade, and cross-border visits. One way to achieve this is by relaxing the visa regime and procedures for diplomatic immunities/privileges. The frequent expulsion of diplomats often as a retaliatory measure, only serves to exacerbate tensions and fuel public animosity. Cultural exchanges should be prioritized as one of the crucial components of confidence-building instruments.

True diplomacy is the art, the science, and how nations, groups, or individuals conduct their affairs, in ways to safeguard their interests, while maintaining peaceful relationships. Religious rhetoric on both sides of the divide does nothing but exacerbate tensions and facilitates extremists only with opportunities to strike at will. Lasting peace and stability requires the willingness to engage in dialogue, compromises, and cooperation prioritising the vital interests of the region. It is certainly the time to move beyond the history of conflict and mistrust and work towards a brighter future.

“Peace is more precious than a piece of land”.
(Anwar Sadat, Nobel Laureate 1978)

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