

Peace in the Subcontinent: Offtrack Once Again

Maheen Shafeeq

Pakistan and India have remained entangled in a matrix that they can neither disregard nor resolve since the departure of the British colonizers. Despite attempts to normalize relations, unresolved issues and disputes continue to jeopardize the future of this bilateral relationship. To move forward, the leaders, as well as public in India and Pakistan, must ask themselves if they intend to remain eternal archrivals or can there be compromise.

The February 2021 decision between India and Pakistan to uphold the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) was seen by many as an initiation of a fresh start between the two states. Undeniably, this decision holds potential. However, the present calm could be tricky to maintain unless Article 370 is reversed and the populist approach of the Indian government is mellowed. A steadfast commitment to resolving these matters could open new avenues for regional peace, stability, and prosperity.

‘The Elephant in the Room – Kashmir’

According to Pakistan’s former Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar, resolving tensions between Pakistan and India might be challenging given the [elephant in the room, which is Kashmir](#). The Jammu and Kashmir dispute can be resolved under United Nations Security Council resolutions. In fact, while Pakistan is dedicated to a peaceful resolution, one must remember that it was India who initiated this process at the UN which is still lingering on and continues to haunt the subcontinent.

Human Rights

The dispute is not just about territory, it is also about human rights. The Kashmiris are not only being maimed with pellet guns, basic amenities such as health and medical care have also been snatched from them. Moreover, voices of the Kashmiri cause are being suppressed by keeping their leadership locked up and journalists arrested. Internet facilities to date remain controlled limiting communication with the outside world. This situation has caused outrage and social unrest and weakened law and order in Jammu and Kashmir. Although the Indian state is claiming that the Internet shutdown is meant to restore peace and order, however, in an age of digital information (and COVID-19) stripping the public of this resource and means of communication can only lead to violent reactions.

Article 370

Furthermore, relations between the two states became more disturbed with abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A that annexed Jammu and Kashmir. The consequence of this is that India is deliberately altering the demographics of this disputed territory by providing land ownership certificates to Indians and non-residents. Under these articles, Kashmiris had autonomy in all spheres except foreign policy, defense and communication and only permanent residents had the right to own property in Kashmir. This is a desperately unlawful attempt at weakening the Kashmiris power and worsening their plight.

[India must consider reversing or start the process of reversing Article 370](#). The unresolved matter of Kashmir is leading to further unrest in the region and corroding the chances of normalization between India and Pakistan.

Rising Populism in India

With the rise of populism in the world, the Modi government also joined the bandwagon. Cashing in on the nationalistic rigor of the Indian public, Mr Modi might be securing his personal political desires, however, he is not catering for the future of the Indian state. The RSS-inspired Hindutva ideology will not benefit the country in the long run as it will only rupture India's goal of becoming an economic giant. It is also keeping the country away from regional integration initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and derailing economic ties with its biggest trading partner China as witnessed post-Galwan crisis. Hence, such an ideology is a mission of self-destruction. It was, in fact, this right-wing extremist ideology that encouraged acts of national embarrassment for India such as Balakot attacks of 2019. Although after Balakot, the return of Indian pilot Abhinandan by Pakistan calmed tensions between the two states, it was a one-sided attempt at peace. The more recent [23 June bomb blast in Lahore](#) clearly shows that India is not interested in

Pakistan and India have a mutual goal of national economic development. Therefore, it is in their best interests that their relations do not deteriorate further. This will only be possible with a shift from an extremist right-wing strategy towards an ideology that intends to normalize relations. [If Prime Minister Modi's government takes one step towards peace, Pakistan would take two.](#)

The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Moreover, the need for normalization of relations between India and Pakistan and setting the pace for the future is also important given the departure of US forces from Afghanistan. With no residual forces, the country could descend into chaos which is likely to spill over. Dealing with the aftermath and consequences of the US withdrawal should be the foreign policy priority of all regional leaders.

Pakistan has shifted its foreign policy from geo-strategic to geo-economic that centers on developing an inclusive economic growth model for the region. India and Afghanistan could participate in such a model, along with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Therefore, India must also, for the sake of promoting regional peace and development, reorient its priorities and resolve the Kashmir dispute by reversing Article 370 and 35-A and allow the Kashmiris to improve their economic condition. If South Asia's leaders can resolve their differences through skillful diplomacy, it can be a gift for the future generations of the region.

Resolve

As noted by Pakistani and Indian speakers in a [recent CASS discussion](#), to begin the process of normalization, [the two states must work towards allowing each other's High Commissioners back](#). Along with this, the role of media needs to be balanced and objective. Moreover, engagement of academia and the think tank community in constructive research in areas and strategies that both states can work on to improve their relations would be of importance.

The two neighbors need to review their past mistakes and missed opportunities to normalize relations. As noted by Pakistan's former Foreign Secretary and CASS Director Ambassador Jalil Abbas Jilani, with the withdrawal of the US and expected outflow of chaos from Afghanistan,

Indian leadership (particularly Prime Minister Modi) must overcome its [‘wooden-headed approach’](#).

War between the two nuclear states is not an option, therefore, India and Pakistan must look at ground realities and work towards innovative solutions to normalize their relations for the sake of future generations.

Maheen Shafeeq is a researcher at the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS). She holds a Master’s degree in International Relations from the University of Sheffield, UK. She can be reached at cass.thinkers@gmail.com.