

The Kartarpur Corridor: Symbolism, Politics and Impact on India-Pakistan Relations

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Executive Summary

The construction of the Kartarpur Corridor has been widely hailed for the opening of a new chapter in India-Pakistan relations. Many hope that the goodwill generated by the corridor and the increased people-to-people contact it will generate could lead to better diplomatic relations between the two countries. Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has even suggested that the corridor could mark the first step towards greater economic ties between the two countries.

The symbolic importance of the Kartarpur Corridor notwithstanding, there are a number of issues that may stymie its long-term impact. Furthermore, there are a number of modalities relating to the corridor itself that have not been spelt out as of yet.

This paper examines the significance of the Kartarpur Corridor and the politics that undergirds its construction. It particularly draws attention to the symbolic significance of the corridor; the attempts to employ religious diplomacy as a means towards developing better diplomatic and trade relations; and the factors that have motivated the various players involved in its development. The paper also analyses the issues and challenges that have to be resolved before the corridor can be opened. These include the types of regime of permits and regulations to be put in place; concerns over the threat of terrorist infiltration and Pakistani support for Sikh separatism; and the demand for Indian consular access to pilgrims in Pakistan.

The Kartarpur Corridor

On 28 November 2018, Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, inaugurated the construction of the Kartarpur Corridor. The corridor is a border crossing that will connect two important Sikh shrines – Dera Baba Nanak Sahib in India and Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan – and provide access for Sikh pilgrims from Indian Punjab to Pakistani Punjab. The Vice President of India, M Venkaiah Naidu, had earlier laid the foundation stone for the Indian portion of the corridor on 26 November 2018.

The construction of the corridor has been widely hailed in both India and Pakistan for opening a new chapter in the relations between the two countries. Many believe that the goodwill generated by the corridor and the increased people-to-people contact it will generate could lead to better diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan. Navjot Singh Sidhu, a Minister in the Indian state of Punjab, welcomed the development as one that will “build bridges, burn

animosity and will act like a soothing balm for two neighboring countries.”¹The fact that two Indian ministers, the Minister of Food Processing, Harsimrat Kaur, and Minister of State with Independent Charge, Hardip Singh Puri, in addition to Navjot Sidhu, joined Khan in Pakistan at the inauguration ceremony is a significant development in itself given that no Indian minister has visited Pakistan in an official capacity since 2016. The corridor could well usher in a new approach towards religious travel between the two countries. Khan even suggested that the corridor could mark the first step toward greater economic ties between the two countries.²

The symbolic importance of the corridor notwithstanding, there are a number of issues such as the Kashmir conflict, accusations of state support for terrorism and Pakistan’s support for Sikh separatism that may stymie its long-term impact. Furthermore, there are a number of modalities relating to the corridor itself that have not been spelt out as of yet.

The Partition and Religious Travel

With the Partition of India in 1947, people living in the new states of India and Pakistan found themselves cut off from religious institutions that they revered. The Sikhs in Indian Punjab, in particular, were separated from key religious institutions. A number of their religious sites now fell in Pakistani Punjab. Amongst these is the Kartarpur Sahib *gurdwara* (a Sikh place of worship), which is built on the site where Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, lived for 18 years.

Thousands of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus from India and Pakistan apply for visas to travel across the border each year to visit their respective religious sites. As it stands, religious travel between the two countries is regulated by the ‘1974 Protocol Constituting an Agreement between the Government of India and the Government of The Islamic Republic of Pakistan on Visit to Religious Shrines’. In signing this protocol, India and Pakistan agreed to allow “organised parties” of pilgrims to visit specific sites. These pilgrims are to be issued “Visitor Category” visas.³

In accordance with the 1974 Protocol, an agreed upon number of pilgrims are allowed to visit specific sites and their travel is facilitated and regulated by the host country. Sikh pilgrims from India are allowed to travel to Pakistan four times a year to mark important Sikh commemorations. In total, Pakistan has agreed to issue 7,500 visas to Sikhs from India and facilitate three Hindu pilgrimages constituting a total of 800 pilgrims annually. On its part, India has agreed to allow 1,350 Muslim pilgrims from Pakistan to perform five pilgrimages. The actual number of visas issued each year is affected by cross-border tensions.

¹ Navjot Sidhu, “Soothing Balm for India, Pak”, *NDTV*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/navjot-sidhu-welcomes-kartarpur-corridor-move-says-soothing-balm-for-india-pakistan-1951826>. Accessed on 26 November 2018.

² ‘Imran Khan’s Speech at the Opening of Kartarpur Border’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXWCQU7cfDY>. Accessed 30 November 2018.

³ ‘Protocol Constituting an Agreement Between the Government of India and the Government of The Islamic Republic of Pakistan on Visit to Religious Shrines’. See <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6199/Protocol+on+visits+to+Religious+Shrines>. Accessed 28 November 2018.

The development of the Kartarpur Corridor could potentially lead to a new modality for religious travel. While the details and technicalities concerning travel across the corridor have yet to be worked out, there are a number of proposals that have been thrown up. Khan announced that Sikh pilgrims traveling across the corridor would not require visas.⁴ Officials in New Delhi are talking in terms of a corridor that is open 24 hours a day for 365 days a year.⁵ Both sides have hinted towards opening the route to unlimited number of pilgrims. All of these scenarios will require an amendment to or a repeal of the 1974 Protocol.

Even at this nascent stage, the Kartarpur Corridor is already being looked to as a model for the facilitation of further religious travel between India and Pakistan. In the wake of the groundbreaking ceremonies, Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir have called on the governments of India and Pakistan to develop a similar corridor to allow Hindu pilgrims to visit Sharda Peeth. Sharda Peeth is a Hindu temple dedicated to the goddess Sharda Devi, which now falls in the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. It is not included in the 1974 Protocol as a shrine to which pilgrimages are allowed.

The opening of a religious corridor in Kashmir is being described by some as a means of expanding religious, cultural and intellectual exchanges, and enabling a solution to the crisis in Kashmir. A group of Kashmiri Hindus have written an open letter to the Pakistani Prime Minister to “personally intervene” and “allow us to undertake pilgrimage [sic] to Sharda temple”. They go on to state that such visits will play an “instrumental role in building people to people contact that will lead to confidence building and for establishing permanent peace in the sub-continent [sic]”.⁶

The Politics of Constructing the Corridor

The idea of the Kartarpur Corridor has been in circulation for a number of decades. In 1999, former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee called on his Pakistani counterpart to work together to develop a border crossing at Kartarpur. The idea came into the limelight again when Sidhu visited Pakistan in a personal capacity to attend Khan’s inauguration as the Prime Minister in August 2018. Upon returning to India, Sidhu declared that he had been assured by Khan and the chief of the Pakistani military, General Qamar Bajwa, that Pakistan would open the Kartarpur border in time for the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in 2019.

The month of November has witnessed a flurry of activity on both sides of the border to inaugurate the corridor. India and Pakistan are not only claiming credit for taking the idea forward but also rushed to lay the foundation stone in their respective domains. Within India, the Congress Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Akali Dal are each jostling to claim credit for the construction of the corridor. All three parties have their eyes firmly set on the 2019 national elections. Each hopes that an association with this initiative will bring it a windfall of Sikh votes. Although the Congress Party is in power in Punjab, the BJP, which is in

⁴ ‘Imran Khan’s Speech’, op. cit.

⁵ ‘Cabinet Clears Corridor for Kartarpur’, *Times of India*, 23 November 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/cabinet-clears-corridor-for-kartarpur-up-to-pakistan-border/articleshow/66757948.cms>. Accessed 25 November 2018.

⁶ ‘Open Letter to Imran Khan’, *Kashmir Observer*, <https://kashmirobsERVER.net/2018/travel/kashmiri-pandits-write-open-letter-imran-khan-35723>. Accessed 01 December 2018.

power at the centre, and its ally the Akali Dal, have ensured that they are front and centre of any event associated with the corridor. For instance, a leading figure from the Akali Dal, Harsimrat Kaur Badal, was sent to Pakistan to represent the Indian government at the groundbreaking ceremony.

The Akali Dal is a Punjab-centred political party that has traditionally relied upon the support of Sikh agriculturalists. Over the past three years, the party has lost ground amongst sections of the Sikh community due to allegations that it failed to take action over the reported desecration of Sikh religious texts. In 2015, reports emerged about cases of Sikh religious texts being desecrated in different parts of Punjab. Sikh groups demanded that the Akali Dal, which was in power in the state of Punjab at that juncture, take swift action against the perpetrators. On 14 October 2015, the Punjab police opened fire on a group of Sikhs protesting against the government for what they saw as a lack of action. Two of the protestors died and the Akali Dal was accused of ordering the police action. Various sections within Punjab accused the Akali Dal of acting against Sikh interests.⁷ By associating itself with the opening of the corridor, the Akali Dal seeks to re-establish itself as the party for the Sikhs of Punjab.

For Khan's new government in Pakistan, the opening of the corridor provides an opportunity to illustrate that it has the political will to back up its rhetoric about developing better ties with India. The government seems interested in using religious diplomacy and religious tourism to normalize relations with India.

In his speech at the groundbreaking ceremony, Khan stated that the agreement to open the corridor could be an opportunity for India and Pakistan to chart a new path of friendship and peace. Crucially, Khan was flanked by General Bajwa at the ceremony. Khan stressed that his "government, his party, all political parties, the military and all Pakistani institutions were on the same page" and were committed to work for a new "civilised relationship" with India.⁸ The reference to the military is important as it plays a major role in shaping the country's foreign policy.

Issues that Remain

While both India and Pakistan are trying to claim credit for the initiative, the crucial modalities and technicalities that will govern (and restrict) travel across the corridor have yet to be worked out. These have the potential to limit any lasting impact that the corridor may have on improving relations between the two states. The devil, as they say, lies in the details.

As it is, we have no indication if the corridor will be open all year round or only during specific occasions. Both sides have spoken in terms of visa-free travel but have not spelt out what sort of permits would be required by those seeking to travel across the corridor. Security agencies on both sides of the border will no doubt demand that a strict regime of permits, regulation and monitoring be put in place. Sections within India are already highlighting the potential threat of terrorist infiltration.

⁷ 'Punjab Clashes', *The Indian Express*, 15 October 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/holy-book-desecration-badals-battle-crisis-as-police-firing-kills-two/>. Accessed 28 November 2018.

⁸ 'Imran Khan's Speech', op. cit.

An issue that is likely to pose a major stumbling block is whether India will be allowed to have consular access to the pilgrims. India has been clear that it expects its consular staff to be granted unrestricted access to Indian pilgrims. This is a controversial issue because Indian consular officials in Pakistan have complained about not being allowed to visit Sikh shrines and meet the pilgrims on at least three occasions in the past year itself.⁹

The issue of consular access is linked to concerns over support from the Pakistani establishment for Sikh separatists demanding an independent state of Khalistan. In the 1980s, India witnessed the rise of a militant movement to establish an independent Sikh state. Pakistan's leading intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, has been accused of supporting the Khalistani militants. There is a concern in India that Pakistan continues to support attempts by segments of the Sikh diaspora to revive the demand for Khalistan. Such concerns have been accentuated by a grenade attack by suspected Khalistan militants in Amritsar, India, on 18 November 2018 that killed three people. Officials in India have raised concerns over what they believe to be support for Khalistani propaganda in Pakistan and the influence this may have on visiting Sikh pilgrims. On 23 November 2018, India's Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement calling on Pakistan to take measures to "not allow its territory to be used for any hostile propaganda and support for secessionist tendencies against India".¹⁰

Conclusion

The decision to open the Kartarpur Corridor marks a step in the right direction by India and Pakistan. There have, however, been a number of similar attempts before. The Samjautha Express, a train service linking Delhi and Lahore, and Sada-e-Sarhad, a bus service connecting Delhi and Lahore, were past initiatives that were launched with similar hopes and fanfare as the Kartarpur Corridor. Their impact on India-Pakistan relations was, however, limited to say the least. This time round, it is pertinent to note that the Pakistani military and the government claim to be on the same page.

The future of the corridor and its potential impact on India-Pakistan relations is contingent upon whether the two states will be able to develop sustained channels through which to discuss, firstly, the modalities of religious travel, and, secondly, the expansion of such linkages to other sectors such as trade and commerce.

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⁹ 'India Lodges Protest with Pakistan over 'Harassment' of its Diplomats', *Scroll.in*, 23 November 2018, <https://scroll.in/latest/903199/india-lodges-protest-with-pakistan-over-harassment-of-its-diplomats>. Accessed on 23 November 2018.

¹⁰ See press release by the Ministry of External Affairs on 23 November 2018. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30625/India+strongly+protests+harassment+and+denial+of+access+to+Indian+High+Commission+officials+and+attempts+at+hostile+propaganda+during+the+visit+of+Indian+Sikh+pilgrims+to+Pakistan>. Accessed on 23 November 2018.