

India-Pakistan Relations and the Building of the Kartarpur Corridor

Iqbal Singh Sevea

Summary

Representatives from India and Pakistan met for the second time on 14 July 2019 to discuss the construction of the Kartarpur Corridor. A number of issues have threatened to derail its completion. These include differing opinions over infrastructure and modalities of travel as well as concerns over Pakistan's support for Sikh separatism. Statements issued after the meeting indicate that both sides are close to agreeing on most points of contention. Aside from the symbolic value of the Corridor, the modalities being agreed to may lay the basis for a new regime regulating cross-border travel.

On 14 July 2019, representatives from India and Pakistan met for the second time at the Attari-Wagah border to discuss 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. Both shrines are associated with Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Once complete, the corridor will provide access to Sikh pilgrims from Indian Punjab to Pakistani Punjab.

In the last week of November 2018, both India and Pakistan had, separately, inaugurated the construction of the Kartarpur Corridor to great fanfare. Both sides publicly claimed to have taken the first step in developing this cross-border link and promised to complete it in time for the celebrations of Guru Nanak's 550th birth anniversary in November 2019. The agreement to construct the corridor was widely hailed for opening a new chapter in the often fraught relations between the two countries. Such hopes were shaken when a terrorist attack in Indian Kashmir on 14 February 2019 by a Pakistan-based militant organisation resulted in the Indian Air Force bombing a suspected militant base in Pakistan. In response, Pakistan carried out air strikes in India. This marked the most serious escalation of tensions between the two nuclear powers in the past decade.

In the wake of the cross-border tensions and heightened nationalist discourse in both countries, the meeting to discuss the construction of the corridor is highly significant, even if only symbolically. Pakistan describes the corridor as a goodwill measure that could usher in better relations between the two countries. Moreover, the corridor is part of Pakistan's broader plan to promote religious tourism to the country. Religious tourism has been earmarked as a key sector and the Pakistani government plans to develop facilities to attract Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist religious tourists.

Within India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and its regional ally in Punjab, the Akali Dal, and the Congress Party, which governs the state of Punjab, each seek to gain support amongst the Sikhs by claiming credit for the construction of the corridor. It is in this context

that Indian and Pakistani representatives met to discuss outstanding issues relating to the corridor.

There are a number of issues inherent to the project itself that have threatened to derail its completion. These include different opinions over the type of infrastructure that should link India and Pakistan, the modalities relating to travel, and concerns in India that Pakistan could utilize the corridor to support Sikh separatism in India.

In the 1980s, India witnessed the rise of a militant movement to establish an independent Sikh state known as Khalistan. Pakistan's leading intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, has been accused of supporting Khalistani militants. There is a concern in India that Pakistan continues to support attempts to revive the demand for Khalistan. Indeed, India pulled out of talks scheduled for 2 April 2019 when Pakistan included Gopal Singh Chawla in the 10-member team overseeing the negotiations over the corridor. Chawla is a prominent pro-Khalistani Pakistani Sikh who was instrumental in preventing Indian consular officials in Pakistan from visiting Sikh shrines and meeting Indian pilgrims in 2018. Indian officials and security analysts 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. The recent talks only went ahead after Pakistan removed Chawla from the team less than 48 hours before the meeting was scheduled to take place.

Statements issued by spokespersons for India and Pakistan after the meeting indicate that both sides are close to agreeing on most points of contention. Mohammed Faisal, spokesperson of Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that more than 80 per cent has been agreed upon and that the remaining issues will be resolved in a future meeting. As of now, both sides have agreed to build a bridge over a creek of the Ravi River which flows along the border. Pakistan had initially wanted to build an embankment but the Indians objected that this may lead to flooding on the Indian side.

India and Pakistan have also agreed to allow visa-free travel for Indian pilgrims as well as those carrying Overseas Indian Cards. Up to 5,000 pilgrims a day will be allowed to cross. Both of these points are extremely important as they mark a significant turn in relations between the two countries. As it stands, religious travel 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. According to this protocol, pilgrims must be issued with specific Visitor Category visas and can only travel as part of organized parties at specific times a year. Furthermore, only 7,500 visas are issued to Sikhs from India. In contrast, the Kartarpur Corridor is slated to welcome pilgrims traveling individually or in groups all year round. Pakistan has also agreed that the crossing will be open to pilgrims of all faiths, not just to Sikhs.

The agreements reached in the second meeting signal a willingness on both sides to compromise and to review long-standing protocols. Both sides are keen to draw upon the symbolic importance of the corridor. For Pakistan there are also significant economic benefits attached to the expansion of religious tourism. However, it remains to be seen whether the Kartarpur Corridor will fall prey to the Kashmir conflict and wider strategic posturing. If successful, the corridor could lay the basis for a new regime regulating cross-

border religious travel, and potentially more socio-cultural exchanges between India and Pakistan.

.

Associate Professor Iqbal Singh Sevea is a Visiting Associate Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at iqbal@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.