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India and Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Meeting: New Hopes and Expectations

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Abstract

This paper discusses the recent meeting between Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna and the newly appointed Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar in New Delhi on 27 July 2011. Unlike the previous foreign ministers' meeting in Islamabad in 2010, the recent meeting between the two foreign ministers had a more positive feel to it. While no major breakthroughs were achieved, some confidence building measures were announced, paving the way for greater interaction between the two neighbours with a view to improve relations in the future.

Introduction

Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna and the newly appointed Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar held talks in New Delhi on 27 July 2011. This meeting was part of a series of high-level meetings aimed at normalising relations between the two countries and bringing the relationship back on track. There have been a number of official high-level meetings since the Mumbai attacks of 2008, but this is the second time that the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan have met after the 2008 attacks. (The first meeting between Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna and the then Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was held in Islamabad in July 2010.)

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Significance of the Meeting

An important feature of this meeting was the willingness on the part of both India and Pakistan to engage with each other. The emphasis was on keeping the dialogue going without letting it become hostage to contentious issues. At the previous foreign ministers' meeting in July 2010, for example, the issue of terrorism drove a wedge in the discussions between India and Pakistan, particularly after David Headley's testimony implicating the Pakistan Inter-Services-Intelligence (ISI) in the Mumbai attacks.² This time, terrorism was not allowed to become a stumbling block. New Delhi and Islamabad remained committed to carry on with the talks, which came just two weeks after the triple bomb blasts in Mumbai on 13 July 2011. More significantly, both countries showed considerable maturity and restraint in dealing with the issues at hand. India resisted from jumping to conclusions or indulging in a blame game until investigations of the July 2011 attacks were completed. In a similar vein, Pakistan also resisted from making any remarks on India's alleged role in aiding the insurgency in Baluchistan.

Indeed India's primary concerns remain terrorism and cross-border infiltration. Previously, India was reluctant to resume dialogue with Pakistan unless Pakistan took appropriate action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks. However, this time New Delhi realised that unless India engaged with Pakistan in a meaningful manner, it was not likely to make any headway in dealing with terror and, much less, win Pakistan's cooperation on this issue. Alienating the Pakistani government would also encourage the non-state actors and hardliners in the country.

Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao³ admitted as much when she said that policy-making needed to be looked at in a dynamic situation and that 'the decision to re-engage with Pakistan ... is a very realistic approach to dealing with problems with Pakistan.'⁴ Pakistan, on its part, believed that 're-engagement was better than no engagement'⁵ and pressed for continuation of dialogue on the basis that it was itself a victim of terrorism and was engaged in its own war against the militants. Thus, instead of becoming a serious hurdle, terrorism

² According to Indian Home Secretary G.K. Pillai, US terror suspect Headley's interrogation had revealed the complicity of the ISI and the Lashkar-e-Taiba Chief Hafiz Saeed in the Mumbai attacks and that the ISI was 'literally controlling and coordinating it (the attacks) from the beginning till the end,' 'ISI behind 26/11, from start to end: Home Secy', *Indian Express* (14 July 2010), <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/ISI-behind-26-11--from-start-to-end--Home-Secy/646108>. Accessed on 31 July 2011.

³ Ms Nirupama Rao was the Indian foreign secretary at the time the foreign ministers' talks were held. With effect from 1 August 2011, Mr Ranjan Mathai was appointed India's new foreign secretary.

⁴ 'Pakistan has altered stance on terrorism: India', *Dawn* (4 July 2011), <http://www.dawn.com/2011/07/04/pakistan-has-altered-stance-on-terrorism-india.html>. Accessed on 31 July 2011.

⁵ India-Pakistan Talks, *Dawn* (22 July 2011), <http://www.dawn.com/2011/07/27/india-pakistan-talks.html>. Accessed on 30 July 2011.

was projected as a common scourge afflicting both countries.’⁶ Accordingly, both ministers agreed to ‘strengthen cooperation on counter-terrorism including among relevant departments as well as agencies to bring those responsible for terror crimes to justice’.⁷

Another highlight of the ministerial talks was the appointment of a new foreign minister in Pakistan – 34-year-old Hina Rabbani Khar, the youngest and the first woman foreign minister of the country. Ms Khar is the niece of the noted politician and former Punjab governor Mustafa Khar. She was Minister of State for Finance and Economic Affairs (2008-11) and more recently Minister of State for Foreign Affairs before being elevated to the position of Pakistan’s Foreign Minister in July 2011. Notwithstanding her relative inexperience in foreign policy matters, Ms Khar generated a positive buzz in Indian media circles, and added an element of glamour and freshness to the talks.

Achievements

Embracing an open attitude, both Mr Krishna and Ms Khar struck the right chords from the start. Ms Khar hoped that the two countries would not be ‘burdened by history’ and would ‘move forward as good, friendly neighbours who have a stake in each other's future.’⁸ Mr Krishna reiterated the need for a ‘peaceful and cooperative relationship’ between India and Pakistan which he claimed ‘we owe to ourselves and to the generations to follow’.⁹

As expected, given the chequered nature of Indo-Pak dialogue, no major breakthroughs were achieved. However, discussions were held on a range of issues including terrorism, narcotics control, economic cooperation, the Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project, Sir Creek, Siachen, Jammu and Kashmir, confidence-building measures (CBMs) to promote peace and security, and greater people to people contact, with a commitment to continue dialogue in these areas in the future. Most noteworthy was the decision to hold a meeting of experts to discuss nuclear and conventional CBMs as early as September 2011.

⁶ Pakistan’s foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, reiterated that ‘we are at the forefront of the global effort against terrorism; we are also its greatest victim. Other countries also have a commitment against terrorism and that shows a convergence of views within the region.’ Anita Joshua, ‘Re-engagement is better than no engagement’, *The Hindu* (26 July 2011), <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article2296376.ece>. Accessed on 27 July 2011.

⁷ ‘Joint Statement following meeting between S.M. Krishna, Foreign Minister of External Affairs of India, and Hina Rabbani Khar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan,’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/mfa/pages/article.aspx?id=778&type=1>. Accessed on 31 July 2011.

⁸ ‘Indo-Pak foreign secretaries finalise CBMs ahead of FM-level talks tomorrow’, *Hindustan Times* (26 July 2011), <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/725884.aspx>. Accessed on 29 July 2011.

⁹ ‘India wants stable Pakistan, terror free South Asia: Krishna’, *The Asian Age* (27 July 2011), <http://www.asianage.com/india/india-wants-stable-pakistan-terror-free-south-asia-krishna-933>. Accessed on 30 July 2011.

The more tangible outcomes included a slew of CBMs to enhance cross-border trade and travel along the Line of Control (LOC). A total of 21 items were identified for cross-LOC trade and the number of trading days increased from two to four per week along the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakot routes. Improvements were also made to the bus service along these routes. Measures to liberalise the visa regime were discussed to boost travel across LOC for tourism and religious pilgrimage, with emphasis on accelerating the processing time for visa applications.¹⁰ At a broader level, economic engagement between the two countries was emphasised, including ways to maximise bilateral trade. Expansion of people-to-people contacts through media exchanges and sporting events also formed an important part of the discussions.

What set the talks apart from earlier events was the clear message that cooperation rather than confrontation had to be the order of the day, given the enormity of the problems confronting the region. Such was the commitment to keep the eye on the ball that even prickly issues, from India's perspective, such as Ms Khar's meetings with Kashmiri separatist leaders Syed Ali Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, were not allowed to detract from the big picture.

Pressure from the United States (US) also helped in spurring the process forward. Given the fluid situation in Afghanistan, regional stability is critical for US interests, considering its commitment to gradually reduce its troops from Afghanistan. With US-Pakistan relations at an all-time low after the Osama Bin Laden episode, the US would not want to risk further instability in the region arising from India-Pakistan tensions. From India's perspective, engagement with Pakistan could enhance its image as a responsible power reaching out to its neighbours to bring peace to the region. Further, by showing resolve to cooperate with Pakistan, India may win brownie points with the US, and help it to press Pakistan to take more effective and urgent action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks of 2008.¹¹ For Pakistan, this was an opportunity for it to demonstrate that it is equally committed to peace and stability in South Asia and is capable of taking a leading role.

Way Forward

While the meeting did not culminate in substantial breakthroughs, it helped promote confidence building in certain areas. Both countries pledged to keep the lines of communication open to take matters forward. Whether this momentum can be sustained or not will depend upon many factors, including the internal politics of both countries,

¹⁰ 'Joint Statement following meeting between S.M. Krishna, Foreign Minister of External Affairs of India, and Hina Rabbani Khar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan,' Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/mfa/pages/article.aspx?id=778&type=1>. Accessed on 31 July 2011.

¹¹ This issue found mention in the recently concluded India-US Strategic Dialogue in New Delhi on 19 July 2011. See 'India-US Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement', *The Hindu* (19 July 2011), <http://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/article2259865.ece>. Accessed on 30 July 2011.

particularly the role of the Army in Pakistan, and the respective democratic governments in engaging each other. The strategic interests of the two countries in the region and beyond, particularly Afghanistan, where both Pakistan and India vie for influence, will also have a bearing on the Indo-Pak peace process. Hopefully, this meeting will set the stage for the next foreign ministers' meeting scheduled for 2012 to consolidate and build upon the goodwill that has been generated.

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