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India and Pakistan Prime Ministers' Meeting: Looking to the Future Rajshree Jetly¹

Abstract

This brief discusses the recent meeting of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani on the sidelines of the 17th SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Summit in Maldives. While no substantial gains were made, the meeting ended on a positive note and laid foundations for further talks and greater cooperation between India and Pakistan in the near future.

Introduction

On 10 November 2011, the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met along the sidelines of the 17th SAARC Summit in the city of Addu in Maldives. The meeting was as eagerly awaited as the SAARC Summit itself, coming as it did in the wake of the recently conferred MFN (Most Favoured Nation) status to India by Pakistan. The two Prime Ministers, Manmohan Singh and Yousuf Raza Gilani, had earlier also met along the sidelines of the last SAARC Summit in Thimpu, Bhutan in April 2010. The Addu meeting was significant in terms of building on the spirit of dialogue and cooperation that has characterised most of the recent high-level meetings between India and Pakistan.

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Significance of the Meeting

Continuing in the same spirit as the last Foreign Ministers' meeting in July 2011, where both parties underlined the need to rise above the acrimony of the past, the recent Prime Ministerial meeting spoke of starting a 'new chapter' in the relations between the two countries. The sincerity of the two parties in wanting to make progress was evident from the fact that the meeting of the Prime Ministers was preceded by high level delegation-level talks between the two sides.² The discussions touched on a range of issues affecting both countries, including water, terrorism, Sir Creek, Kashmir and Siachen.

What made this meeting significant was that it was conducted in the context of an important development, namely Pakistan's decision to grant the MFN in principle to India.³ It is to Pakistan's credit that it was able to make the bold move despite pressure from some vested interests within Pakistan that were opposed to granting India MFN status. The MFN was initially contingent on movement on the Kashmir issue for Pakistan, but while Kashmir still remains an issue between the two countries, Pakistan has shown political courage and vision in moving forward in exploring this economic avenue. This action by Pakistan is a positive confidence-building measure which has the potential for opening up trade and business opportunities, and bringing in a new era of cooperation in all aspects of Indo-Pak relations. At the meeting both sides agreed to liberalise the visa regime, re-energise the Indo-Pak joint commission that has not been functional since 2005, and work out the details for the Preferential Trade Agreement.⁴ The Prime Ministers also decided to move expeditiously on cross-LOC border movement of people and trade as per the terms agreed in the Foreign Ministers meeting of July 2011.

Terrorism, which remains a major concern for India, also featured in the discussions. India reiterated its apprehensions about terrorism and its desire for the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai attacks to be brought to justice. The request was received sympathetically by Pakistan, which promised to send a judicial commission to India to assist with the investigations and expedite progress on the case. Pakistan's Interior Minister Rahman Malik made another supportive gesture of reaching out to India by calling one of the perpetrators and the lone survivor of the Mumbai attacks, Ajmal Kasab, a 'terrorist and non-state actor' who should be sent to the gallows. The Indian Prime Minister reciprocated

² The delegation comprised of high-ranking officials including the Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers, S.M. Krishna and Hina Rabbani Khar; Foreign Secretaries Ranjan Mathai and Salman Bashir respectively; the Indian National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon and Pakistan's Interior Minister, Rahman Malik.

³ India had offered MFN status to Pakistan in 1996.

⁴ Harsh Pant, 'Indo-Pak ties, Can Economics Trump Politics', *Business Standard* (13 November, 2011) <http://business-standard.com/india/news/harsh-v-pant-indo-pak-ties-can-economics-trump-politics-/455230/> Accessed 13 November 2011.

Pakistan's sentiments and called Gilani 'a man of peace' who was willing to work with India.

Significantly, the talks moved away from 'accusation and counter accusations' to focus on charting the future.⁵ Neither side allowed any one issue to colour and/or obstruct the proceedings. Instead, the emphasis was on accommodating each others' concerns with an eye on the future. The talks ended on a positive note with the expectation of a series of further discussions to make real progress on all outstanding matters affecting Indo-Pak relations.⁶

Incentives for Moving On

Building upon the wave of goodwill generated by recent confidence building measures,⁷ both India and Pakistan appear keen to realise the huge advantages of cooperation as opposed to confrontation that has proved costly and debilitating for both countries. In addition to the bilateral dynamics, there is also the regional dimension where improved Indo-Pak relations would have a beneficial impact on all SAARC countries.

From Pakistan's perspective, there may have been additional considerations. It is plagued by political and economic challenges, and its relations with the United States (US) are also at an all-time low. All of this is putting Pakistan under considerable pressure, and if ever there was a time to reduce tensions with India, this was it. The impetus to reach out to India is not limited to the civilian administration alone, with the Pakistan military also getting behind the initiative.⁸

This was evident from the army's endorsement of granting the MFN to India. The Pakistan army have traditionally been seen as benefiting from strained relations between India and

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, India Media statement by Foreign Secretary after meeting of PMs of India and Pakistan (10 November 2011), <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=100018504&pid=2413>. Accessed 13 November 2011.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 'Pakistan positively evaluates Maldives Bilateral Summit with India' (11 November 2011), <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/mfa/pages/article.aspx?id=988&type=1>. Accessed 13 November 2011.

⁷ Apart from the grant of the MFN, other gestures include the release of an Indian helicopter and the crew that had accidentally strayed into Pakistan-administered territory. India also supported Pakistan as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, and Pakistan has endorsed India's candidate for the post of Commonwealth Secretary-General.

⁸ Sandeep Dikshit, 'Pakistan Military is on board, says Manmohan,' *The Hindu* (12 November 2011) <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article2622010.ece?homepage=true>. Accessed 13 November 2011. Also see Javed Naqvi, 'Pakistan Army on Board, Says Singh', *Dawn* (13 November 2011) <http://www.dawn.com/2011/11/13/pakistan-army-on-board-says-singh.html>.

Pakistan, as it helps justify their disproportionately greater role in Pakistan's power politics. The army's endorsement of this move is a positive signal for spelling out the contours of the Indo-Pak relationship in future. For India, reduction of mistrust with Pakistan is equally necessary as it enables a peaceful environment within its borders and allows it to play a more constructive role in reaching out to its neighbours and lifting SAARC out of the current state of inertia.

Looking Ahead

The recent meeting should be seen as an important step in building better relations between India and Pakistan. That there were no tangible outcomes is understandable given the complex relations between India and Pakistan; it would be unreasonable to expect a dramatic turnaround. Given the fragile nature of the Indo-Pak relationship, it is important to build and invest in the relationship in a steady manner. There is no denying that core issues such as Kashmir, terrorism and Afghanistan are still to be resolved. For Pakistan, Kashmir remains a question on the uppermost issue on its agenda; for India, terrorism is the potential deal-breaker. Afghanistan has re-emerged as another arena of competition with both India and Pakistan competing for strategic and economic influence in anticipation of US withdrawal from the region. However, the fact that both countries are reaching out to each other and willing to keep up the momentum is a welcome sign. This momentum must be sustained for the Indo-Pak peace process to become a reality.

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