

ISAS Brief

No. 408 – 23 February 2016

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Track-Two Dialogue in the India-Pakistan Context

Despite the limitations and constraints within which Track-Two dialogue operates, it has been an important medium to explore new policy options between India and Pakistan. It has acted as a platform upon which to have discussions about many contentious issues such as Kashmir's political dispensation, demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier, and cross-border terrorism.

Samir Ahmad¹

Key Words: India-Pakistan relations, Track-Two diplomacy, Kashmir problem, unofficial peace process

Over the last few decades, particularly after the onset of globalisation and the global triumph of economic liberalisation, there has been a palpable change in the nature of world politics and in the conduct of inter-state relations. The traditional view of politics was state-centric. Therefore, attention was focused mainly on the national level of government activity.² But, now there has been a certain degree of recognition for the contributions by private citizens to the missions of

¹ Dr Samir Ahmad is Assistant Professor (Contractual) at the Department of Politics & Governance in the Central University of Kashmir in Srinagar (India). The author, not the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

² Andrew Heywood, *Politics* (New York: Palgrave Foundations, 1997), 125.

international peace-making and conflict-prevention. The conventional means of resolving intra-state or inter-state disputes, such as military intervention, official diplomacy, are now supplemented by the efforts of civil society groups, non-state actors, think-tanks and private institutions. They play an important role in the conduct of relations between and among the states, and influence the issues of global concern. In the last few decades, they have become so prominent that the liberals see them as seriously challenging the nation-state as the main actor in the international arena.³

A number of ‘tracks’ have emerged and are emerging to play roles in the conduct of relations between states particularly in managing inter-state crises. Among these various levels of activity, Track-Two dialogue (often mistakenly referred to as Track-Two diplomacy) has emerged as a significant conflict-resolution mechanism in terms of the role it has played in recent times across the globe. Track-Two ‘diplomacy’ is sometimes referred to as *Interactive Conflict Resolution* (ICR). Track-Two ‘diplomacy’ pertains to policy-oriented discussions that are non-governmental, informal and unofficial in nature, but which are quite close to governmental agendas, and often involve the participation by people who are close to governmental quarters and influential over policy matters, such as retired diplomats, retired civil and military officials, public figures, and policy analysts. On occasions it may also involve the participation of government officials in their private capacities.

The concept and practice of Track-Two ‘diplomacy’, as a conflict-resolution and conflict-prevention approach, originally emerged during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁴ Since then, it has been used as an important tool to advance the dialogue process among parties in dispute in many conflict zones across the globe, for example Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland-Great Britain, India-Pakistan, and so on. The Track-Two process is a more-comprehensive and broader approach, encompassing a variety of non-official dialogues between members of adversary groups or nations, which aim to develop strategies, influence public opinion and organise human and material resources in ways that might help to resolve conflict. The

³ Robert Keohane, et al., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Glenview, III - 2nd ed.: Scott 1989), 31

⁴ See W.D. Davidson and J.V Montville, “*Foreign Policy According to Freud*,” in *Foreign Policy*, 45, winter (1981-82), but this is generally attributed to Montville.

exponents of Track-Two ‘diplomacy’ value psychological and cultural awareness to address the human aspects that are appropriate in a workshop setting and in similar activities, but which tend to create difficulties in official processes.

The agenda of Track-Two work is fluid and responsive to the psychological and systemic barriers to conflict-resolution, thus seeking to overcome them. Moreover, the Track-Two proponents are of the view that such unofficial initiatives broaden the range of participation in the dialogue process among the antagonist groups, allowing consultation with parties that need to be represented but are not officially involved. In fact, it is now quite widely recognised by Track-One diplomats that it is unlikely that modern-day conflicts can be resolved without Track-Two dialogue, as it helps in easing the various barriers between adversarial groups. Given its focus on both fostering relationships and on strengthening civil society, Track-Two is especially useful with regard to India and Pakistan.

India-Pakistan relations have been intricate and strained following independence from British colonial rule in 1947. It is a well-established fact that, over the last sixty-odd years, both countries have remained at logger-heads with each other, primarily because of the political complexity of the Jammu and Kashmir problem.⁵ The two countries have always used their substantial resources to try and outwit each other, economically, diplomatically and militarily. Three full-fledged wars in 1947, 1965, and in 1971, the first two explicitly over the Jammu and Kashmir issues, were fought between the two countries. In addition, there have been a number of serious but localised military confrontations, for example, Operation Meghdoot (1984), Operation Brasstracks (1986), and a small-scale war at Kargil (1999). During the rest of the time, the relationship was at best characterised as a state of *Cold War* or *Cold Peace*. The relationship between the two states came to its lowest point in 1989-90 with the eruption of militancy in Kashmir, with India saying that Pakistan had a direct role in supporting cross-border militancy first in Punjab and then in Kashmir. This created a more dangerous and explosive situation in the region. Simultaneously, the two nations sought nuclear parity. It was subsequently, late in 1998, that both India and Pakistan exploded nuclear devices; on 11 and 13 May at Pokhran and 28 and 30 May at Chagi, respectively.

⁵ Noor Ahmad Baba (1999), “Origins and Dimensions of Crisis in Kashmir”, in Shri Prakash and Ghulam Mohd Shah (eds.), *Towards Understanding the Kashmir Crisis*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 54.

The failure to achieve substantial progress on issues confronting the two countries made a strong case for unconventional diplomacy, particularly in the post-1990 situation when violence in the state of Jammu and Kashmir became a medium of asserting political will. Prevailing tensions between the two nuclear-armed states became a genuine cause of alarm to the international community and for the citizens of the two states, each with much to lose in an escalated conflict. It was in this context that Track-Two initiatives began to be mobilised and used to try and influence the relations between India and Pakistan in a positive direction.

The first prominent Track-Two initiative between India and Pakistan was the Neemrana dialogue that took place under the auspices of the United States Information Services (USIS) in 1990 and was later joined by American foundations and German non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Its first meeting was held at the Neemrana Fort in Rajasthan, India, in October 1991. The group comprised former diplomats, former military personnel, media persons, NGO workers and academics from India and Pakistan. Since then, there has been a significant increase in the number of Track-Two initiatives between India and Pakistan such as the Balusa Group, Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIFPD). Of late, some new such initiatives have started, such as the Chaophraya Dialogue, the WISCOMP annual workshop, the Pugwash Conferences, Ottawa Dialogue, and so on. There exist more than twelve highly institutionalised Track-Two groups, as well as over twenty other people-to-people exchange programmes operating between the two nuclear-armed powers,⁶ with both external and internal funding.

However, given its Western origin, there have been varied views and opinions vis-à-vis the role and relevance of Track-Two 'diplomacy' in the South Asian Context. Critics generally argue that the various non-official dialogues – particularly Track-Two initiatives – have largely remained confined to the quasi-official realm, with a few retired government officials, both civil and military, dominating most of the activities. The situation becomes further complicated, as most of these people have represented their governments at some point in time, and thus they tend to adopt positions very similar to those of their governments once the core issues come to the fore.⁷

⁶ Samir Ahmad, *India-Pakistan Relations: Role of Track Two Process Since 1990* (PhD diss., Kashmir University, 2014).

⁷ Shantanu Chakrabarti, "The Relevance of Track II Diplomacy in South Asia", *International Studies*, 273 Accessed: 1/08/2013, <http://isq.sagepub.com/content/40/03/265.citation>

Furthermore, given the prolonged hostile atmosphere between India and Pakistan, questions and queries over the role and relevance of Track-Two dialogues have intensified. The ‘track-two’ activists, however, hold the view that it is a useful and effective conflict-management mechanism. For instance, it has led to an increased understanding and a lessening of escalation in tensions. Moreover, it may help resolve on-going disputes by preventing the emergence of new disputes, as well as build confidence between the parties involved. A general consensus has evolved among many scholars and peace practitioners that the Track-Two dialogue between India and Pakistan has been able to:

- Facilitate the track-one diplomacy process between the two countries
- Keep the channels of communication open even during the times of crises at the official level
- Effectively break down the stereotypical and enemy images of each other
- Expand the peace constituencies across the border

Just a few years back, it was taboo in both India and Pakistan to discuss peace and reconciliation with each other. Contrary to that, the situation has significantly changed. Governments as well as civilians on both sides of the border have recognised the pros and cons of peace and conflict. There is a very strong realisation among civil society groups operating on either side of the border that the costs involved in maintaining animosity against each other are much higher than any gains from the current hostile situation. At a time when the relations between India and Pakistan have lurched from crisis to crisis, Track-Two dialogue has been able to sustain an element of unbroken engagement. For example, immediately after the Kargil crises⁸ in late-1990s, when the interactions at the official level completely ceased to exist, several dialogues through the Track-Two process and other unofficial means were in progress to prevent an exacerbation of the situation. Similarly, after the 2008 terror attacks on Mumbai, despite the complete suspension of official diplomatic engagement, many Track-Two initiatives were pursued, under the watchful eyes of the two governments, to ease tensions and resume a state of normality.

⁸ Balraj Puri, Review: Lessons of Kargil, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 51 (Dec. 22-28, 2001).

Conclusion

Despite some of the limitations and constraints within which Track-Two ‘diplomacy’ operates, it has been an important medium to explore new policy options between India and Pakistan. It has acted as a platform upon which to have discussions about many contentious issues such as Kashmir’s political dispensation, demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier, and cross-border terrorism. It has been helpful in bringing down the psychological barriers, bridging the cultural differences, promoting mutual trade and developing an atmosphere conducive to the betterment of the region. Furthermore, the bilateral Track-Two dialogue processes have also played a pivotal role in bringing key issues to the forefront and in applying intellectual capacity and civil activism to broad policy-stalemates where the state has essentially failed. While non-official ‘diplomacy’ cannot be a panacea for the mistrust amassed over decades of hostility, it provides a unique opportunity for the citizens of India and Pakistan to prevent the bitterness of the past from tainting the future. The future role of Track-Two dialogue in South Asia may be minimal without a concurrent improvement in the relations at the official level, but a sustained multi-faceted dialogue will help build confidence and prove constructive for both sides’ perceptions of one another. This in effect will ease domestic tensions and hostility and pave the way for enlightened political action.

.