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India-Pakistan Relations: A Destructive Equilibrium

Is there a way to avert the constant derailing of bilateral relations?

By Jordan Olmstead

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The seven-decade rivalry between India and Pakistan is often portrayed as intractable – with good reason. The countries were birthed out of a bloody partition that encouraged each to define itself in opposition to the other, and they have fought four wars since.

Even during peacetime, tensions are high. This year, though, encouraging overtures by newly elected prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi led some observers to cautiously hope that the two countries would step up cooperation on trade, energy, humanitarian, and environmental issues.

Unfortunately, other actors, most notably the Pakistani defense establishment and its terrorist proxies, are derailing the process. There are two reasons. First, they see further cooperation and integration between India and Pakistan as putting off negotiations to settle the Kashmir issue. Second, from a broader perspective, closer relations between India and Pakistan would undermine the perception, held by a substantial portion of the Pakistani public, that India poses an existential threat to Pakistan. Both the military and terrorists would lose their *raison d'être* if this were to occur.

Thus, a destructive equilibrium has emerged, in which both cooperative overtures and displays of deterrence by the Indian government have the potential to lead to a further deterioration of Indian

and Pakistani relations. However, a new and more cooperative equilibrium could be achieved if India and reconciliatory elements within Pakistan's government were able to establish patterns of cooperation on non-securitized issues, and prevent those issues from becoming securitized.

How did India and Pakistan arrive at this equilibrium? The answer starts, of course, in Kashmir, which has always been the primary point of contention between the two countries. Unfortunately, the Kashmir question is unlikely to be answered soon. While territorial disputes between states are usually bitter and persistent – states usually perceive competition over territory as a winner take all, zero sum proposition – Kashmir presents a particularly difficult case.

For India, its claim to Kashmir rests on three main arguments. First, during Partition the ruler of Kashmir “choose” India over Pakistan (albeit in distress), giving India a legal claim to the territory. Second, retaining control over Kashmir is essential to India's identity as a secular democracy, which can accommodate different ethnic and religious groups across a wide geographic area. And third, if India lost control of Kashmir, it would encourage separatist movements across the country.

Pakistan counters that India's claim is illegitimate because, as a Muslim country established for Muslims, Pakistan should control a region like Kashmir that is predominantly Muslim and that culturally shares more with what is now Pakistan than it does with India. Moreover, Pakistan refutes India's claim to Kashmir on the grounds that India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru promised Kashmir a UN administered plebiscite in 1956. This promise was not kept, denying Kashmir the right to self-determination.

Unfortunately for Pakistan, Kashmir isn't going anywhere. India has 500,000 soldiers in the region, and withstood a brutal insurgency in the 80s and 90s to retain control. Pakistan also lacks the military prowess to coerce India into ceding Kashmir, as evidenced by the wars Pakistan (largely) fought and lost in a bid to coerce India into making *any* substantive concessions on the issue.

Unfortunately for everyone else, Pakistan is unwilling to accept this reality. One of the few issues that a majority of Pakistanis rally around is Kashmiri independence. Adopting an unyielding stance on Kashmir helps tap into this popular support. However, the real problem stems from the Pakistani defense and intelligence establishment, and their terrorist proxies, exemplified by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

In her recent book *Fighting to the End (The Pakistan Army's Way of War)*, C. Christine Fair of Georgetown argues that “The ‘strategic culture’ of the Pakistan army is essentially unremitting hostility against India. The Pakistan Army believes that it is locked into a permanent, existential, civilizational battle against India.”

The Pakistani defense establishment is split between those who believe India merely seeks to undermine Pakistan and its security at every turn, and those who believe India has nefarious designs to “reunify” the subcontinent. The conflict in Kashmir serves as a salient symbol of this

civilizational struggle; Pakistan's loss of Kashmir to India plays a crucial role in the narrative that casts India as a threatening, unjust, and unreliable "other."

More importantly, since Kashmir is such a potent symbol of India's menace, it enables the Pakistani army to justify the massive amounts of resources devoted to it, and the outsized role played by the defense establishment in Pakistani society. Terrorist organizations like the LeT, which was established (and generously patronized by the Pakistani establishment) to wage covert war against India in Kashmir, are even more dependent on the conflict in Kashmir to justify their existence. Thus, even though Pakistan will never possess Kashmir, the Pakistani defense establishment and Pakistani terrorist groups have strong psychological and material incentives to continue the conflict there.

With the elections of Modi and Sharif, it seemed that Indo-Pakistan relations might turn a corner. Sharif, who expressed his "earnest hope" in a "brighter future" between India and Pakistan made normalizing relations with India a "central plank" of his platform, and attended Modi's inauguration. When India cancelled talks between the foreign secretaries in retaliation for Pakistani meetings with Kashmiri separatist organizations Sharif sent a box of the "choicest Pakistani mangoes" to Modi in a bid to patch things up.

Unfortunately, "mango diplomacy" could not block the Pakistani defense establishment, which had been empowered after protests forced Sharif to beg for the army's help, which he got in return for handing it control over the country's defense and foreign policy portfolios.

The flashpoint, of course, was Kashmir. Many analysts, including Farahnaz Ispahani, a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and a former member of Pakistan's parliament, argue that "[Sharif's] moves towards better ties between India and Pakistan" angered the military and "may have resulted in the renewed clashes on the Line of Control."

For its part, India is pursuing a "tit-for-tat" strategy, in which it is willing to cooperate if Pakistan shows the willingness, but will respond to aggression with aggression. Unfortunately, Pakistan's defense establishment has no interest in cooperation.

The military will also use political means to stymie cooperative arrangements. For instance, while Sharif promised to extend Most Favored Nation trading status to India without preconditions, the agreement remains un-ratified; the Pakistani government now holds that India must restart a comprehensive "composite dialogue," which includes the issue of Kashmir, before Pakistan will consider ratifying the agreement.

While populist protectionist impulses and distrust of India are partially explain this backtracking, a "substantial part of the business community, in particular small and medium sized enterprises fear being overwhelmed by cheap Indian goods." Notably, many former Pakistani soldiers and officers own or are employed by these enterprises. Thus, the military has an incentive "protect their own" by pressuring the civilian government against ratification.

External factors also militate against movement towards a cooperative equilibrium. The NATO drawdown in Afghanistan is creating a space for increased competition between India and

Pakistan, which both view Afghanistan as strategically important. Analysts also fear that the drawdown in Afghanistan will result in an influx of militants into Kashmir, something the Pakistani defense establishment may encourage, to prevent them from coming to Pakistan instead.

The recent incursion by the Pakistani military into North Waziristan pushed a variety of terrorist organizations, including the Punjabi Taliban, into Afghanistan, undoubtedly worrying India, as these organizations will work with the Afghan Taliban in their insurgency against the Indian-supported government.

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and the Islamic State also threaten to exacerbate conflict. Both groups are recruiting in Kashmir, and AQIS has threatened to launch attacks in India. Undoubtedly, increased militant activity in Kashmir, or Islamist terrorist attacks in India would deteriorate the relationship between India and Pakistan.

Glimmers of Hope

Still, there are glimmers of hope. Pakistan and India have managed to cooperate on “non-securitized,” non-zero sum issues like disaster response and energy, and the countries have made good faith efforts to deepen trade ties. India pledged relief to Pakistan after the latter’s devastating 2010 earthquake, and Pakistan reciprocated after recent floods in Indian administered Kashmir. The two countries have also discussed a proposal to share information about the level of rivers that run between the two countries to form an early warning flood system.

India and Pakistan also inked a gas sharing agreement, which encourages efforts to bind South and Central Asia together through the proposed TAPI pipeline, which would run through Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. The pipeline could help alleviate Pakistan’s chronic gas shortages, which cost the country 6 percent of its GDP a year.

These areas present opportunities for small clusters of Pakistani and Indian officials, businessmen, and think-tankers to cooperate on low-profile issues, and discuss the benefits of, and terms for, deeper cooperation on more substantive issues. Small wins in Track II diplomacy settings could spill over and push India and Pakistan towards a more cooperative equilibrium. A landmark study by David Axelrod of the University of Michigan found that the introduction of small clusters of individuals committed to establishing cooperative equilibriums, with a sufficiently high expectation of cooperating again in the future, can push large groups from non-cooperative equilibriums to more cooperative ones. Why? Over time, small cooperative clusters create broader institutional change, because those who employ them are ultimately more successful than those who employ uncooperative strategies.

While a full explanation of this phenomenon requires a background in game theory and a bit of math, an oversimplified “toy model” for this context would predict that cooperation between Indians and Pakistanis on non-securitized issues would heighten expectations that the two countries would cooperate on more issues, and more frequently in the future. This would give players more of an incentive to choose cooperative strategies when interacting with their counterparts. The higher the likelihood of future cooperation, the higher the incentive to pursue

cooperative strategies in the present, since pursuing an uncooperative strategy in the present would place you at a disadvantage in future interactions.

However, the parties involved must prevent nascent clusters of cooperation from becoming “securitized.” Issues of national security are traditionally viewed as “zero-sum”: One party gains from the other party’s losses. Thus, if diplomats or technocrats allow the Indian or Pakistani defense establishments to securitize issues like water sharing or energy cooperation, compromises will become that much harder to reach, as any concession will be painted as possibly undermining national security. Thus, discussions over these issues should be kept quiet (and preferably held in Track II settings like think tank symposiums) and achievements should be publicized little, if at all.

The United States could help create an environment that is more conducive to cooperation by maintaining the largest possible military presence in Afghanistan that its agreement with Kabul allows until 2016, dissuading Pakistan and India from exacerbating their competition there (at least in the short run).

While this may not end the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan, it’s imperative for the prosperity and stability of the region that opportunities for cooperation be pursued further. The most pressing issue is climate change, a transnational threat that requires transnational responses. For instance, Pakistan’s water supply is expected to shrink by 30 percent over the next 20 years, while its population is projected to nearly double by 2050. This could severely strain the vital Indus Water Treaty, which governs water sharing between the two countries. India also stands to gain through greater cooperation: Climate change threatens to wipe out 8.7 percent of India’s GDP through an increase in floods and droughts unless adaptation and mitigation measures are taken. India could become more resilient to floods by sharing river level information with Pakistan to form an early warning system, and by discussing best practices for making land and communities more resilient to climate change. The two countries could also jointly lobby major powers to reduce their carbon dioxide emissions further.

While traditional overtures between India and Pakistan may not help the relationship, discreet and adept diplomacy between NGOs and technocrats on non-securitized issues like energy, humanitarian operations, climate change, and trade could establish patterns of cooperation that steer Pakistan and India towards a less antagonistic, more cooperative, strategic equilibrium.