

COMMENT 209 - India-Pakistan relations and the upcoming Ankara conference on Afghanistan

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India-Pakistan relations recently experienced a new low – expressed in a sharpened public rhetoric, the frequent occurrence of [cease-fire violations](#) at the ‘Line of Control’ (LoC)¹, contestation over influence in Afghanistan, and other dynamics. The decades-old bilateral tensions gathered particular steam in August 2019 as [New Delhi abrogated Article 370](#), which granted the Indian-administered State of Jammu and Kashmir a special, autonomous constitutional status.² [Since then](#), New Delhi has conducted a series of measures to operationalize the administrative aspects of the territory’s reconstitution, for example the ‘[Kashmir domicile law](#)’. In response, Pakistan launched a major public diplomacy campaign, apparently including elements of disinformation, so as to internationalize the Kashmir conflict. In November 2020, Pakistan presented a [dossier](#) allegedly revealing ‘[irrefutable evidence](#)’ of India’s involvement in sponsoring terrorism and attempts to destabilize Pakistan. More concretely, Pakistan accused India of supporting ‘[various tactical terrorist campaigns aimed at reviving the greatly diminished insurgencies in the restive Balochistan province and the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province](#)’, among several other issues.³ These accusations also have implications for Afghanistan-Pakistan ties, since the dossier claims that India is

¹ The 776-km Line of Control (LoC) is the *de-facto* border between the two countries in the disputed region of Kashmir. The LoC corresponds roughly to the cease-fire line drawn up after the India–Pakistan war of 1948, later amended under the Simla Agreement of 1972, and has been a source of conflict for almost the entire period of both states’ existence. (Mitra, Wolf, Schoettli, 2006:211)

² Via the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, the state was transformed into two Union Territories (UTs) on 31 October 2019, now called the ‘Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh’.

³ Such as the creation of a special unit (militia) to sabotage the CPEC.
See also <https://www.dawn.com/news/1592313>

[‘running dozens of training camps in Afghanistan for multiple, globally outlawed militant groups to plot terrorism on Pakistani soil’](#). The Indian embassy and consulates in Afghanistan are allegedly responsible for conducting such activities. The [report claims](#) that Indian intelligence officers operate ‘under the diplomatic cover from consulates in Afghanistan’.

The accusations made in this dossier (either based on evidence or ‘artificially fabricated’) not only further worsen India-Pakistan relations but also constitute a hindrance to an Afghanistan-Pakistan rapprochement. One should note that experts [question](#) this report and wonder about the timing of the disclosure of its “core findings”. It appears that the dossier [aims](#) to gain the attention of the US administration and [influence](#) President Biden’s policy towards India. It is also interesting to note that the accusations were put forward by Islamabad when New Delhi prepared [‘to take a rotating two-year seat on the U.N. Security Council in January’](#). Additionally, Pakistan attempts to [describe India](#) as a threat to peace and stability in Afghanistan.⁴ In order to strengthen this perception of India as a threat, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister claims that New Delhi is planning a series of (surgical) [strikes](#) against his country.

Nevertheless, Islamabad and New Delhi ‘agreed for strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight 24/25 Feb 2021.’⁵ If effective, this joint statement could mark a milestone in India-Pakistan relations (the most relevant since both countries agreed on a ceasefire along the LOC in 2003) and a crucial turning point towards the reduction of violence in the Kashmir region. Moreover, it is the first common agreement between these countries for many years. The joint statement by the respective Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) is being hailed by many observers as [‘pathbreaking’](#).

⁴ For example, PM Khan stated that it is [‘important for the negotiating parties to be “vigilant about the role of spoilers” who continue to “disrupt” and undermine the peace process’](#) just a few weeks after the dossier about alleged Indian sponsorship of terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region came out.

⁵ The Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) of IND and PAK [‘held discussions over the established mechanism of hotline contact’](#). Furthermore, both ‘sides reviewed the situation along and subsequently the DGMOs agreed to respect the existing agreements. Further, the statement stresses that the two DGMOs [‘agreed to address each other’s core issues and concerns which have propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence’](#) in the interest of [‘achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders’](#).

However, it's far too early to identify the agreement as a gamechanger in the ties between Islamabad and New Delhi, and this for several reasons: One must expect that Pakistani-based elements with an anti-India agenda will continue to jeopardize the 2003 ceasefire, especially now as it is reinforced/re-affirmed. Indian army sources already pointed out that there would be '[no let-up](#)' in counter-terrorism measures as a result of the statement. Moreover, Indian armed forces '[retained the "right to respond" in case there is a terror attack in the future](#)'. Here, one must also recall that all former peace efforts were undermined by elements from within Pakistan's security sector (foremost ISI and the army), mostly in cooperation with terrorists based either in Pakistan or in India. The 'Cricket Diplomacy' of February 1987, 'Bus Diplomacy' of February 1999, the 'Havana Handshake' of September 2006, or the 'Surprise Stopover' of December 2015, all initiatives launched by New Delhi to improve ties with Islamabad, were brought to an end either by a direct, open military intervention (Kargil Offensive in 1999) by the Pakistani army or by indirect, clandestine means used by Pakistani proxies conducting major terrorist attacks (Mumbai 2008 attack) or other forms of aggression against India (like the support of Sikh terrorism).⁶ Additionally, it remains to be seen whether this "peace effort" is rather part of a larger public image campaign, since both Pakistan⁷ and India are keen to improve their own reputational standing. However, besides the scepticism regarding how far the joint statement will become translated into concrete and effective practice, it is noteworthy that by obviously using '[back-channel diplomacy](#)' ('[behind the scenes contacts](#)'), Pakistan and India are relaunching their traditionally mechanism of communications for de-escalation.⁸ This is relevant because the US is in the process of working out its South Asia approach in general and its policy for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in particular. Considering that the negotiation ("Doha process" or "intra-Afghan track") between the Afghan Government (GIROA) and the Taliban is stalled, Washington and the most significant regional actors are all increasing their efforts to find alternative or

⁶ See for more details on the causal link between Indian peace initiatives and corresponding Pakistani-sponsored terrorist acts or open intervention by the country's armed forces: [Prem Mahadevan \(2021, March 3\)](#).

⁷ Here, it is also crucial to factor in Pakistan-China relations. These countries are celebrating 70 years of diplomatic relations – and Beijing the 100 years anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (this summer). One is therefore to expect tremendous public diplomacy campaigns not only by China but also by Islamabad so as enhance its own side of the equation.

⁸ In the discussed case, it is reported that such back-channel diplomacy took place between the Indian and Pakistani National Security Advisors.

complementing approaches to revive the probably irredeemable peace talks. At the centre stage of these efforts to prepare the ground for an coordinated “regional track” is an [envisaged UN-sponsored conference in Turkey](#) (Ankara), an initiative [proposed by Washington](#)⁹ and intended to bring the warring factions back to the negotiation table.

Doubtless Pakistan, which took a central role in facilitating US-Taliban negotiations (“US-Taliban track”) resulting in their “February 2020 peace deal” and the subsequent launch of the GIROA-Taliban negotiations, expects to continue playing a key role in searching for a political solution to the Afghan imbroglio. Considering Pakistan’s traditional policy of approaching the international community in its attempts to find support for its position in the Kashmir conflict with India, it is probable that Pakistan does not reject an UN-convened conference on Afghanistan and is even willing to participate constructively. However, since the initiators of the “Ankara conference” are obviously identifying a regional consensus on the potential trajectory of Afghanistan as essential for a sustainable peace, India’s participation is crucial and was consequently requested. But with India’s inclusion, Pakistan finds itself in a “strategic dilemma”. On the one side, Islamabad’s main goal is to keep India out of Afghanistan (and thus of any negotiations over the country’s political future) as well as to describe New Delhi as a spoiler of the Afghan peace process. On the other side, in order to appear as a credible, neutral actor interested in peace and stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan needs to accept India’s participation and even collaborate with New Delhi. Failing to do so would risk angering Washington, raise questions about the seriousness of Pakistan’s latest peace efforts with India, and create contradictions within Islamabad’s official approach towards the UN (as it advocates a UN role in Kashmir, it therefore must do as much in Afghanistan – namely by not lobbying against Indian participation). Additionally, some among Pakistan’s leadership hold that not backing up UN efforts would harm the national interest to play a central role in Afghanistan’s political developments – especially when it comes to finding a solution with regional actors. However, and rather obviously, Pakistan is not

⁹ The notion to hold a conference -including regional actors- convened by the UN was part of a proposal toward peace in Afghanistan by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested in a [leaked letter](#) to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

“pleased” about the announced India participation in such a conference. Perhaps Pakistan considers that New Delhi’s role in the latest “Ankara initiative” will always be limited – in which case it is doubly guarded against a too overtly, active undermining of an Indian participation (which would be both non-strategic and unnecessary). In any scenario, however, one should expect Pakistan to use the conference as a platform to express concerns about New Delhi’s participation, an attitude not very supportive to create an environment for constructive collaboration. Finally, another major question remains: how far will Afghanistan become an area of conflict between China and the US (as well as India)? It will be interesting to monitor whether Beijing is able to influence Islamabad’s approach towards Kabul or whether the Pakistani leadership is capable to convince Beijing of supporting – or at least accepting – its anti-India stand in Afghanistan. Doubtless, a sharpening of US-China rivalries, combined with ongoing Pakistani-Indian hostilities, will add to the already extraordinarily grim perspective of the Afghan peace process.

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