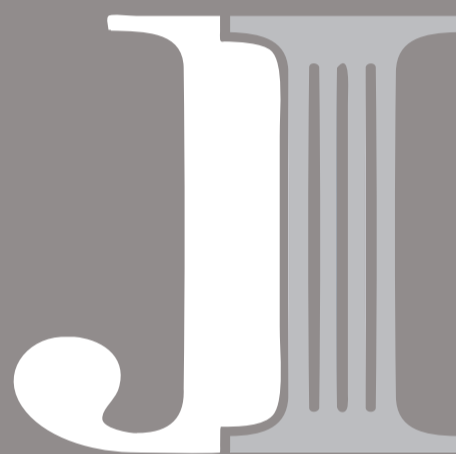


2017

INDO-PAK

Past the Red Noise



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CONTRIBUTORS

Salman Bashir

Former Foreign Secretary and High Commissioner to India

"Gale-strength winds are gaining momentum across Eurasia and also the Pacific and Atlantic; collectively South Asia stands at an important turning point in global history, and India has opted to be on the wrong side of this history..."



Riaz Khokhar

Former Foreign Secretary, and Ambassador to the United States and China

"There is no such thing as a normal relationship between India and Pakistan: relations are always either abnormal, or ultra-abnormal, or war-like. Pakistan and India quite frankly have no choice but to talk, especially given that the alternative road is dangerous..."

Zahid Hussain

Jinnah Institute Senior Fellow and Journalist

"Last year also saw the emergence of a new normal in India-Pakistan relations, one that can perhaps be characterised best as no war, no peace. India is currently redefining its nuclear threshold, reflecting new strategic thinking in New Delhi..."



Zamir Akram

Former Pakistani Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and to the Conference on Disarmament

"While India tries to maintain the illusion that engaging Pakistan is not important, it is well aware that it cannot deny the geographic importance of Pakistan. Dialogue cannot be one-sided, and in order for any kind of progress to be made, there must be a partner who is equally willing to engage..."

Aziz Ahmed Khan

Former High Commissioner to India, and Honorary Vice President Jinnah Institute

"The constant state of tensions with repeated firing along the Line of Control is a troubling sign of the new normal. India's reaction to the internal situation in Kashmir continues to exacerbate tensions, and things have gone from bad to worse. The solution, if the Indian government is wise, is to cease all hostilities towards the local population. Secondly, India must immediately reach out to all groups that include the Opposition including the Hurriyat..."



Forecasting a New Strategic Normal in India-Pakistan Relations

Jinnah Institute Policy Feature

Early in the New Year, Jinnah Institute asked a panel of five senior foreign policy experts to outline their expectations from the India-Pakistan relationship in 2017, and to signpost what they felt were the biggest challenges to the resumption of constructive bilateral engagement. The five experts were also asked to deliberate on the gamut of foreign policy options available to Islamabad as it navigates a new strategic normal with New Delhi.

GRIDLOCKED IN DRIFT: A NEW STATE OF PLAY?

Salman Bashir: India-Pakistan relations in 2016 remained gridlocked in drift. The two sides are likely to drift further apart in 2017, driven partly by the advent of an extreme rightwing government in India that continues to be ideologically motivated, and a public discourse in New Delhi that has been built on hyper-nationalism. The BJP's reaffirmation of the RSS Hindutva agenda has only served to veer the bilateral relationship off-track. For the moment, India's present approach to the region is one that constitutes a total negation of the very idea of Pakistan. The present political dispensation in New Delhi continues to be dismissive of Islamabad, and has made it clear it only intends to pay lip service to notions of peaceful coexistence.

Riaz Khokhar: There is no such thing as a normal relationship between India and Pakistan; at the best of times the strategic equation vacillates from abnormality to war-like. In many regards, 2016 can be described as the worst year in the bilateral relationship since 2001. There should be no doubt that India is responsible for the most recent escalatory climb. Efforts to catalogue the statements made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his principal cabinet advisors since 2014 will quickly establish the destabilising effects of negative rhetoric emanating from the east. Meanwhile, much credence has been given to the invitation extended to Prime Minister Sharif to visit New Delhi for Prime Minister Modi's swearing-in, as well as the latter's subsequent visit to Lahore. However, these are best viewed as smart public relations moves to convince an international audience that India is sincere in talking to Pakistan.

Zahid Hussain: Last year was arguably the worst in almost a decade of India-Pakistan tensions, and marked by an endless torrent of ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) and Working Boundary. The second-half of 2016 saw the crystallisation of a new normal in India-Pakistan relations – one that can perhaps be aptly characterised as no-war, no-peace. India is currently in the process of redefining its nuclear threshold, as evidenced by hardened force posturing by New Delhi as well as attempts to escalate tensions just short of a full-fledged war. By using allegations of surgical strikes, India has made fairly clear its apathy for regional peace.

Zamir Akram: The present state of relations with India should be seen as a continuation of the status quo. This is essentially a relationship about crisis management. The core problem is neither Kashmir nor terrorism, but rather an asymmetry in the strategic objectives of the two countries. India continues to see itself as having inherited the mantle of British colonial power in the larger South Asian context, and as a regional power on the road to achieving global power status. While Independence from the British created an environment that left both sides highly insecure about the objectives of the other, it is important to understand that India has never reconciled to the idea of Pakistan. Pakistan continues to be the only country in South Asia that refuses to submit to Indian hegemony.

Aziz Ahmad Khan: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif rightly accepted Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to attend the latter's inauguration after the BJP came to power on the heels of a resounding election victory in 2014. The BJP's clear majorities generated hopes that Prime Minister Modi would be able to take bold decisions without the worry of having to look over his shoulder. However, immediately after the two leaders met, Foreign Secretary Sujata Singh's press conference left Pakistan disappointed. Since then, setbacks have occurred each time the two sides have been about to move forward in the relationship, or break the logjam. At the moment Prime Minister Modi seems to be busy playing a game of cat-and-mouse, trying to deflect international pressures while keeping Pakistan at bay.

SHAPING THE POLITICAL CALCULUS

Salman Bashir: Internally, Pakistan remains an influencing-factor in Indian politics, particularly during times of domestic turbulence. The running of pogroms against minorities and the RSS's own communalization agenda colour New Delhi's approach towards Pakistan. The BJP, despite having a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, has failed to attract traffic on the domestic components of its agenda. Big businesses in India that were initially enthusiastic about the advent of Prime Minister Modi now openly profess their disappointment with the BJP's failure to deliver on its electoral promises.

Recent demonetisation is a case in point, in that it has only served to add to India's domestic tensions. The extent to which the BJP remains indebted to the RSS is evident from the nature of New Delhi's foreign policy posturing, and its repeated call to "isolate" Pakistan. Conversely, there is ample political space in Pakistan for moving forward with India. All political parties and institutions, including the military, are clear that Pakistan's strategic priority should be development, for which the foremost requirement is internal stability with a focus on economic and social development. To achieve this, a stable neighbourhood is the minimum imperative, and it is this understanding that has driven the Pakistani reach-out to New Delhi by both the current, as well as the previous, civilian government.

Zahid Hussain: The BJP is going through a critical state election period. Both the UP and Punjab are crucial electoral territories that will determine the BJP's long-term political future. It stands to reason that once these elections are over, there might be a possible initiative by India to resume talks with Pakistan. Islamabad has always expressed its willingness for talks, and Pakistan will not hesitate to take up an offer if the initiative comes from New Delhi. This year also marks the twilight of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's third term, and if an offer comes from India at this point, the government in Islamabad is likely to respond positively.

Riaz Khokhar: It is important to consider the effect that state elections in India, and particularly those in the UP and Punjab, have on the tide of anti-Pakistan rhetoric contouring the BJP's regional foreign policy. India harbours a long-term strategy aimed at softening Pakistan from the inside, and this has recently become more pronounced with National Security Advisor Ajit Doval at the helm of security and intelligence affairs. While 2017 might be slightly different from 2016, there are no real prospects for constructive engagement until the UP election concludes.

Zamir Akram: There is a clear unwillingness in India to compromise, or come to a solution, on outstanding issues of contention with Pakistan. The deadlock on Kashmir is a symptom of this domestic political intransigence, and not the cause of the problem itself.

Aziz Ahmad Khan: There is complete unanimity within Pakistan's political parties and institutions vis-à-vis improving relations with India.

CRISIS IN KASHMIR: FAULTLINES & TRENDLINES

Riaz Khokhar: It is clear that India does not desire to discuss the issue of Kashmir with Pakistan. New Delhi has become accustomed to using repressive measures to bludgeon the Kashmiris into suppression. This is neither acceptable to Pakistan nor to the Kashmiri public. The current situation in Kashmir remains precarious, with curfew still being observed in many pockets, and thousands of ordinary Kashmiris ready to come out in protest. India continues to deploy troops and non-military intelligence organisations to break the will of the Kashmiris, while externally looking to keep Pakistan engaged and off-balance.

Aziz Ahmad Khan: India's draconian approach to the crisis in Kashmir has only made things go from bad to worse. A young, new leaderless movement in Kashmir has been forged out of the on-the-ground disdain for Indian hegemony. The only conceivable solution is for India to immediately curtail its high-handed use of force and open up genuine and well-meaning avenues for dialogue. This must include reaching out to all groups and parties including the Hurriyat. The government in New Delhi should also try to establish contacts with figures leading the stone-pelting youth. Simultaneously, a dialogue process with Pakistan must be initiated. Borders should be made softer allowing ordinary Kashmiris to cross unhindered. Resumption in cross-LoC trade may also perhaps succeed in lowering temperatures across the region.

Salman Bashir: The political leadership in India is at a complete loss on how to deal with the situation in Kashmir. A third of all Indian territory is presently under active insurgency, and the Kashmir crisis that spontaneously erupted over the summer of 2016 is likely to test the very foundations of the Indian Union. The current episode is different from previous crises, in that a new, politically charged generation of Kashmiris has outpaced the traditional Kashmiri political leadership – including the Hurriyat – in calling the shots. Given that the Kashmir dispute is a core issue for Pakistan, the minimum common agenda that both sides can agree to should be one that sees alleviation in the suffering of ordinary Kashmiris.

Zahid Hussain: The uprising in Kashmir last summer has made clear that the BJP's approach of trying to control the situation through the use of force has been an abject failure. Given the PDP's growing isolation, there is growing pressure on the government in New Delhi to initiate some form of talks with the Kashmiris. This, in turn, has put pressure on New Delhi to initiate some form of talks with the Kashmiris. This, in turn, has put pressure on New Delhi to take a concurrent initiative with Pakistan. The present dispensation in India is fully aware that unless Pakistan is involved in talks, tensions in Kashmir are

unlikely to abate. Another challenge thrown up by the 2016 uprising in the Valley is that it has created a potent but leaderless movement.

Zamir Akram: The only time Pakistan and India came close to reaching common ground on the issue of Kashmir was during the Musharraf-Vajpayee process that resulted in a ceasefire agreement (unilaterally proposed by Pakistan), the opening up of border crossings, and a dedicated bus route between Lahore and Amritsar. Today, however, India continues to use the issue of Kashmir and Pakistan's alleged interference in Kashmir as justification for a brutal crackdown in the Valley. The more Indian security forces try to repress ordinary Kashmiris, the further the situation will deteriorate.

GREAT POWER RIVALRIES & THE "CHINA FACTOR"

Zamir Akram: Global dynamics continue to refract on the state of play in South Asia. Recent US efforts to enlist India in the alliance to contain China have exacerbated regional polarities. India no longer sees itself as an aspiring regional power, but rather as a global player with UN Security Council and NSG membership aspirations. While the nuclear waiver of 2008 has allowed India to engage in nuclear commerce with other nuclear states, New Delhi continues to seek NSG membership for the sake of recognition and legitimacy. The US strongly supports India in this quest. There is also a divergence of regional opinion on the issue of reconciliation in Afghanistan. India's growing closeness to Kabul is a cause of concern for Pakistan, given the understanding that Afghanistan is being used as a base to foment unrest in Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). A major source of strategic worry in Islamabad stems from the possibility of two-front confrontation. Meanwhile, the political and security crisis in Afghanistan is certainly resolvable, provided that sober thinking and cooperative outreach replaces US muddle-through as regional policy. The Taliban cannot be defeated by drone strikes. A possible improvement in US-Russia ties under a Trump Presidency will also likely have implications for China's outreach to Pakistan. China and Russia have divergent strategic interests, and so as Pakistan's relationship with China grows, Islamabad must also engage with Russia more pragmatically. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a tangible manifestation of the strategic alliance between Pakistan and China, and for the time being there is unlikely to be any active effort to include India in CPEC, given New Delhi's rigid stance on Gilgit-Baltistan.

Salman Bashir: The global situation is in a state of flux: gale-strength winds are gaining momentum across Eurasia, and from the Pacific and Atlantic. South Asia stands at an important turning point in global history, and India has opted to be on the wrong side of that history. New Delhi continues to pursue policies based on geopolitical considerations including the US rebalance to Asia. An increased maritime focus on the Indian Ocean is also likely to underscore India's thinking towards global and regional affairs, and perhaps prematurely encourage Indian expressions of hegemony. India has invested in military hardware and a blue-water navy to foster its efforts to interfere in the affairs of smaller neighbours that rightly resent New Delhi's newfound imperial arrogance. However, the state of play remains unclear in terms of the policy approach of a new US administration. New initiatives by mainland powers such as China and Russia, meanwhile, are likely to keep global rivals in check. It is in this context that China's One Belt One Road should be viewed as a project of consequence.

Riaz Khokhar: On the international front, Pakistan needs to prepare for the new US administration's posture towards South Asia. India clearly hopes to continue to receive moral and diplomatic support from a Trump Presidency. China, meanwhile, is likely to play a cautious role in navigating the India-Pakistan conflict. Beijing has historically sided with Islamabad, without ever imposing its policies or looking to bend Pakistani policymakers to its will. India will certainly try to create obstacles in Pakistan's path as the latter looks to implement CPEC. New Delhi has already registered its protest against the Corridor passing through Gilgit-Baltistan. Such tactical noises are likely to continue through 2017. Nonetheless, Pakistan should not let this distract from the larger CPEC mission. If anything, CPEC is a flagship project under the One Belt One Road umbrella, and must be implemented as a matter of national priority.

Zahid Hussain: With President Trump now firmly ensconced in power in the United States, considerable uncertainty surrounds his administration's policy towards South Asia. It is hard to predict whether Pak-US relations will deteriorate, and much depends on how the situation in Afghanistan plays out. An important change in the region's geopolitics is Russia's growing assertiveness. An example is the tripartite conference held in Moscow in December to discuss the future of Afghanistan, which Afghanistan itself must join. The rising threat of Daesh in the region also continues to be a major concern for Russia, and the thinking in Moscow is that if the battlefield situation worsens in Afghanistan, subsequent chaos may provide an environment for Daesh to establish a stronger foothold. Pakistan and China share similar concerns, and the prevalent thinking across these capitals is that the situation in Afghanistan must be resolved if regional peace and stability is to stand a chance. The view in Pakistan is that the US-sponsored quadrilateral meetings were not fruitful, which is why these meetings were suspended early last year. The Taliban were not willing to come to the table, and there were questions about Kabul's own commitment to the process. The new forum or format of talks with Russia could be more useful, given that it includes regional countries with direct stakes in Afghanistan's stability. However, US participation is necessary for any meaningful consultation on the Afghan situation.

BORDER FLARE-UPS & COMBATING TERRORISM

Aziz Ahmad Khan: Pakistan contends that the LoC has been heating up primarily due to an upswing in Indian activity and New Delhi's increased use of force in Indian-occupied Kashmir. The constant state of tensions, and repeated firing along the LoC, is a troubling new normal for the bilateral relationship. At home, meanwhile, Pakistan needs to do more to ensure that anti-India groups are not afforded public space. In the aftermath of the attack on Pathankot, Pakistan has worked hard to try to convince India that while terrorism is a valid concern, this needs to be tackled through dialogue and not accusatory mud slinging. One way of jointly addressing the issue of terrorism is to foster greater intelligence-level contact between the two countries.

Riaz Khokhar: India's approach has been to keep Pakistan engaged on the LoC, while trying to forcefully deal with the crisis in Kashmir. While India's objective in alleging successful surgical strikes was to provoke escalation, Pakistan was smart in its measured response. Early signs in the New Year, however, suggest that the LoC may in fact be quieting down. Meanwhile, New Delhi continues to raise the issue of terrorism and Pakistan's alleged involvement in terrorist activity as a bilateral irritant. Pakistan must actively work to address India's concerns, provided that terrorism and Kashmir are discussed at the same time and at the same level. Pakistan has also suffered diplomatically from an inability to come up with a clear narrative on the issue of terrorism. If there is any solid evidence of Pakistan's involvement in cross-border terrorism, then there should be greater effort on Islamabad's part to address these concerns. At the same time, Pakistan has also been on the receiving end of Indian conspiracy and subterfuge, and a strong diplomatic case must be made and lodged against subversive Indian activity aimed at internally destabilising Pakistan.

Zahid Hussain: The last two months have seen fewer instances of clashes and firing on the LoC. While it is possible this relaxation may be the result of the winter snow, 2017 may just possibly see a thawing of ice between the two neighbours. On the issue of terrorism, however, Prime Minister Modi has attempted to depart from his predecessors by advocating that any terrorist activity in India warrants reactionary action by New Delhi. India has also understood the obvious limitations to these threats, as evidenced in the aftermath of the attack on Pathankot. The attack on Uri, however, resulted in significant escalation, much to the detriment of regional peace and stability, and without clear evidence of Pakistani involvement.

Salman Bashir: When Pakistan-India relations go badly, they drift into a default state of confrontation. This usually takes the shape and form of ceasefire violations along the LoC. India's shameless boasting about surgical strikes speaks to a mindset that is disinclined to accommodate or even accept the existence of Pakistan. Any solution to the issue of Kashmir will also first require peace along on the LoC.

WAGING PEACE IN SOUTH ASIA IN 2017

Riaz Khokhar: In times of crisis, Pakistan and India have no choice but to talk, especially given that the alternative road is far too dangerous to visualize. South Asia remains a heavily deployed region, and the reaction time for any decision taken is far too small. While there are certainly irritants in the relationship, these are amenable to solutions provided that both sides leverage the necessary will and political support to sustain them. While the core disputes between India and Pakistan are likely to remain, less contentious issues such as people-to-people-contact and trade are more readily solvable. On the foreign policy front, however, Pakistan needs to be clearer in articulating its interests. The underlying understanding is that Islamabad supports the people of Kashmir and their right to self-determination, but there must be greater thinking about how to categorically translate this support in policy terms.

Salman Bashir: Both sides stand to benefit from a bilateral reset. However, given that relations between India and Pakistan are always top-driven, it would take a meeting of the two leaders to make that happen. Both sides would then have to work towards a vision statement or action plan to help break the ice. Another way forward would be to focus on the humanitarian agenda, i.e. the issue of fishermen and prisoners. The two countries have also signed a new visa agreement that is awaiting implementation. Efforts can also be made to promote parliamentary and media exchanges. Pakistan will always look to conduct its foreign relations on the basis of sovereignty and mutual respect. Pakistan's foreign policy orientation vis-à-vis its membership of the SCO, its increasing interaction with Central Asian states and Russia, and its commitment to implementing its cooperation with China in the form of CPEC, all stand out as positive imperatives. Whether it likes it or not, India will always remain geographically and historically hyphenated with Pakistan, and will be unable to exit South Asia's gravitational pull and rise to the position it aspires to unless it recalibrates its regional policy. It is, after all, in the interest of all South Asian states to see the region benefit from processes of Eurasian connectivity.

Zamir Akram: In the absence of a major effort by the Indian leadership to reduce temperatures, the bilateral stalemate is likely to continue through 2017. While India tries to maintain the illusion that constructively engaging with Pakistan is doctrinally unimportant, it is well aware that it cannot deny the geographic reality of Pakistan as a sovereign nation state that exists across the border. Pakistan will always be ready to engage, provided that dialogue is not one-sided. After all, for any kind of progress to be made, there must always be a partner that is equally willing to engage.