

India, Pakistan and Kashmir: Of Buses and People

India's and Pakistan's February 15 decision to start bus service between the separated parts of Kashmir has given their peace talks a badly needed boost of energy, and an extensive array of people-to-people contacts have been well received in both countries. Both countries are committed to continuing the dialogue, but they are still a long way from seriously negotiating the issues that have divided them for over half a century. Pakistan is looking for evidence that the thorny Kashmir issue is moving forward; India is hoping that popular contacts will build enough confidence to change regional politics. Commitment to talking may keep violence down for a time, but will not by itself solve the problems between India and Pakistan.

Keeping talks alive: The agreement on the basic arrangements for starting bus service between Srinagar, capital of Indian-administered Kashmir, and Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistan-administered part, came as a badly needed tonic to an India-Pakistan dialogue that was in danger of petering out. The agreement balanced the needs of both sides. Pakistan got its way on the knotty question of travel documents: rather than passports and visas, travelers will carry entry permits, to be issued within each side's part of Kashmir and apparently approved by the other side. India succeeded in opening travel to all citizens, rather than restricting it to residents of Jammu and Kashmir. The launch of bus service was set for April 7, a date that may slip a bit because of disruption caused by heavy snows in Kashmir.

This was the first visible result from the dialogue since Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met in New York in September 2004. At the same time, popular contact between Indians and Pakistanis was growing at an accelerated pace. Besides visits of delegations between the two countries, both countries had expanded the number of visitors and the places they could visit. Pakistanis, including journalists, visited India and Jammu and Kashmir, and Indian journalists visited Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. And in March 2005, the Pakistani cricket team toured India, to the huge enjoyment of audiences from both countries. Indian visa officers in Pakistan were reported to have issued 20,000 visas in the few days preceding the first game.

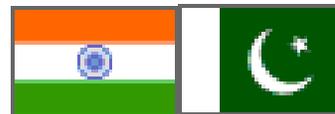
In December 2004, prominent Kashmiris from both sides of the Line of Control attended a meeting sponsored by Pugwash in Kathmandu. They held a meeting separate from the Indian and Pakistani participants, a first for Kashmiris from different parts of the state. They then issued a statement that eloquently called on India and Pakistan to work with Kashmiris toward a genuine peace settlement.

including Kashmiris in this policy of expanded contact is a new departure, especially for India.

The view from Islamabad: Pakistanis welcome the opportunity for visits, but feel that the foundations for better Indo-Pakistani relations are still at best fragile. They favor the bus service but do not want this first piece of Kashmir-related progress to be the last. Government officials are pleased at the way the negotiating process worked in the run-up to the bus announcement, including both formal and back-channel contacts. But they are concerned about problems ahead, including growing disagreements over water.

The Pakistan government appears to have strong popular support for its India policy. Secular politicians who have little good to say about Musharraf agree that maintaining the dialogue makes sense. The religious parties are less enthusiastic, but even they accept the bus agreement and support expanded popular contact.

The view from Delhi: The Indian government also has strong support for maintaining talks, starting bus service and expanding popular contacts. However, the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is starting to take its gloves off in dealing with the government on Pakistan policy. In both countries, popular support could turn out to be quite shallow if there were a resurgence of violence or some new horrible incident.



The India-Pakistan cricket match in March 2005 and President Musharraf's interest in attending it attracted considerable media buzz in India. However, President Musharraf's practice of using the press to launch new ideas, including the idea of coming to India for a cricket match and diplomacy, strikes many Indians not as spontaneity but as an effort to embarrass India in public by provoking some kind of awkward reaction.

Gas, water and trade: India and Pakistan have begun discussions on a gas pipeline that would cross Pakistan before reaching India. Contrary to its usual practice, Pakistan has agreed to discuss the pipeline without linkage to any other issue (read Kashmir), and the Indian government agreed to start work on the pipeline issue despite its concerns about potential interruptions of service. A pipeline could give both India and Pakistan a real stake in improved relations. However, the U.S. has serious concerns about a pipeline that would start in Iran, and U.S. Secretary of State Rice expressed those publicly during her visit to India and Pakistan in mid-March. A pipeline originating in Turkmenistan would not present policy problems for the

United States, but would include other complications, since it would have to cross Afghanistan.

Water issues have been on the front burner because of India's and Pakistan's inability to resolve their differences over India's proposal to construct a dam at Baglihar, on the Chenab River in Kashmir. Following the procedures set forth in the Indus Waters Treaty, Pakistan asked the World Bank to name a neutral expert to help them resolve their differences.

The Bank is trying to put the issue back into bilateral channels. However, this dispute has touched a nerve in the critically water-short Pakistan. A dam India wants to build on the Kishenganga River, which raises similar Indus Waters Treaty issues, is likely to move toward formal dispute settlement much more quickly. Both issues highlight the fact that on water issues, Pakistan's interests and those of Kashmir diverge. Pakistan is not prepared to "unbundle" trade issues in the same manner as energy, but might be prepared to move forward on trade if this could be put in a SAARC context.

"Progress on Kashmir:" Pakistan will calibrate its work on other India-Pakistan issues to "progress" on Kashmir. There is no common definition of "progress." Pakistanis in the government speak of such benchmarks as improved human rights conditions in Kashmir. The two sides have very different views of the human rights situation and how to improve it, however.



Rice meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi. (Photo: U.S. Department of State)

The area that offers the greatest opportunity for continued progress is further expansion of popular contacts between the two parts of Kashmir. India has already suggested that it would favor additional bus routes, including one from Jammu to Sialkot, and possibly opening up "meeting areas" where families from opposite sides of the Line of Control could get together. This could make possible small-scale local trade and perhaps the reestablishment of the traditional grazing arrangements for the Gujjar community. These represent significant policy adjustments, and could give Kashmiris a stake in continued dialogue among the stakeholders in the India-Pakistan and Kashmir issues.

Silence between Delhi and Srinagar: Political dialogue between the Indian government and the Kashmiris on its side of the Line of Control is still extremely thin. The state government in Jammu and Kashmir, on the Indian side, is not eager to engage on big political issues like reshaping the relationship between the state and the central government. There is currently no substantive contact between either the central or the state government and the Kashmiri separatists. Some argue that the Pakistan government has pressured the separatists not to respond to Indian offers of meetings with senior political leaders. On the Indian side, there seems no sense of urgency. Violence is down, although not gone, but Indian policy-makers do not yet appear to see this as the moment when they need to reward Kashmiri political activists for the decrease in violence with a renewed effort at serious political conversation.

The separatists in the Kashmir valley are badly divided, and no one has emerged as a decisive leader. They generally support the bus service, but are disappointed that no effort was made to share the credit for this accomplishment with a wider set of Kashmiri constituencies. Municipal elections in February brought some new people into the lowest rung of elected political office. Comparisons with other elections at the state and national level are misleading, but participation levels suggest that a somewhat larger number of Kashmiris are willing to participate in politics at the level at which every-day decisions involving their lives are made.

An estimated 350,000 Kashmiri Hindus, known as Pandits, left the valley in 1989, and are no closer to returning home. Of these, 200,000 are in Jammu, 100,000 in Delhi, and the rest scattered around India in small groups. They feel neglected by all levels of the political system. They remain dedicated to the proposition that the Pandit population must return to the valley, in a group rather than in small numbers. They appear to have virtually no dialogue with the Muslims of the valley. Though this would be the most important prerequisite for the kind of reconciliation they want. Pandits as well as people from Ladakh, a largely Buddhist area on India's side of the Line of Control, participated in the Pugwash meeting in Kathmandu. This may have started to sensitize other stakeholders to the importance of dealing with the non-Muslim and non-Kashmiri-speaking populations in Kashmir.

What next? For the time being, the India-Pakistan dialogue is likely to continue. Kashmiris and Indians are focusing mainly on process issues—how to keep the dialogue going, how to structure talks, how to bring different constituencies into the dialogue and so on. President Musharraf's recent efforts to think out loud about possible alternative settlements in Kashmir have been greeted with caution in Pakistan, and have had little resonance in India.

There has always been a school of thought in India that questions whether a Kashmir settlement is possible. In the past, those who think this way have sought to have India confine its negotiations over Kashmir to the Kashmiris on its side of the Line of Control. India's current approach seeks to improve the day-to-day reality faced by Kashmiris to the point where they will be willing to live with the

region's current de fact borders and political affiliations. The only serious dialogue now under way is with Pakistan, however. But this approach can only succeed if Pakistan or the Kashmiris have the patience to wait out a process of very slow political change—or if India decides to put some more ambitious changes in its relations with Kashmir and with Pakistan on the table. India's changed policy is significant, but so far, it does not seem to get over that threshold.

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