

ARE INDIA-PAKISTAN PEACE TALKS WORTH A DAMN?

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The international community's routine call for continuous India-Pakistan dialogue is not only misguided but also counterproductive. This entreaty, which often follows major Pakistani-supported terrorist attacks in India, fails to recognize that the security competition between the two nations is not actually driven by discrete, negotiable differences. Rather, the discord is rooted in long-standing ideological, territorial, and power-political antagonisms that are fueled by Pakistan's irredentism, its army's desire to subvert India's ascendancy as a great power and exact revenge for past Indian military victories, and its aspirations to be treated on par with India despite their huge differences in capabilities, achievements, and prospects.

Pakistan's revisionist behavior is further intensified by its army's ambition to preserve its dominance in domestic politics. Moreover, its possession of nuclear weapons has permitted its military and intelligence services to underwrite a campaign of jihadi terrorism intended to coerce India—with the expectation that Pakistan will remain fundamentally immune to any meaningful military retaliation. This manifestation of hostility toward India makes any kind of diplomatic solution satisfactory to both Islamabad and New Delhi highly elusive. Even worse, the Pakistan Army feels emboldened by the international calls for bilateral engagement, believing that its strategy of nuclear coercion successfully invites foreign pressure on India to make concessions on territory and other issues thus far out of reach.

The Fundamental Asymmetries in Strategy

- India is content with the status quo. It accepts Pakistan's existence as a state and is content to have the current Line of Control be the legitimate, internationally recognized boundary in Jammu and Kashmir.
- India aspires to achieve great power status, and its most pressing strategic challenge is countering the rise of China. Consequently, India sees Pakistan's antagonism and its support for terrorism as distractions that consume resources otherwise better spent on fueling its ascent on the world stage.
- In contrast, Pakistan aims to revise the status quo. It sees India as an existential threat to its survival and perceives itself to be India's genuine peer competitor. Although both perceptions are dubious, Pakistan continues to use force, as well as jihadi terrorism, to achieve its strategic objectives of weakening India and securing political concessions.
- More broadly, the Pakistan Army's conflict with India preserves its domestic political and economic predominance, and its efforts at protecting the "ideology of Pakistan" end up sustaining the perilous notion of a permanent Muslim resistance toward a "Hindu India."

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Prospects for a Settlement

- India's clear geopolitical, economic, and military superiority implies that Pakistan cannot compel it to revise the status quo by force. Nor does India have to offer any compromises to procure peace because it is both a satisfied and dominant power. Since Pakistan lacks the means to either wrest the territories it lays claims to or reverse its continuing relative decline vis-à-vis India, the path to peace depends largely on Pakistan's willingness to accept its current strategic circumstances.
- Since the full subordination of the Pakistani military to its civilian leadership is unlikely for the foreseeable future, a shift in Pakistan's orientation and behavior will depend fundamentally on the military itself. The army's former chief of staff Pervez Musharraf provided the best hope to date that peace could be negotiated by an idiosyncratic military leader who is willing to change the army's objectives with respect to India. Unfortunately, Musharraf has proven to be the exception, not the norm, in the Pakistan Army.
- Great power mediation is not an adequate alternative for peace either, since the United States lacks the means to alter Pakistan's strategic calculus and China lacks the desire. Even if motivated, however, China would likely utilize Pakistan to slow down the rise of its emerging Asian competitor, India.

Implications for the International Community

- The United States and others in the international community should recognize—in the current environment—that continued dialogue will not extinguish the entrenched grievances that drive the Pakistan Army's passionate animosity toward India. There is a role for Washington and others in encouraging a peace settlement between the two nations, but it requires subtlety and, first and foremost, must involve pressing the Pakistan Army to cease supporting jihadi terrorism in India.
- The Pakistan Army should also be persuaded to acquiesce to the current territorial and strategic realities involving India and, as a consequence, end its relentless revisionism—which threatens to destabilize the Indian subcontinent and the security of Pakistan itself. The international community may never be able to convince Rawalpindi of the benefits of accepting the status quo, but it should certainly avoid reinforcing troublesome Pakistani behavior through a premature and futile call for dialogue.

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