

DailyTimes | Indo-Pak dialogue

Given the limitations of track-I and track-II dialogues, it is useful to invest in silent back channel diplomacy in the Indo-Pak context. Let us not demonise this option



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The recent meeting between Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Indian business tycoon Sajjan Jindal has raised a controversy in Pakistan. While a section has seen it as a back channel, others have questioned the legality and protocol involved.

With this meeting as the background, this commentary will discuss various diplomatic channels available for Indo-Pak dialogue and their relative effectiveness.

Democracies normally conduct foreign relations through official channels led by their foreign ministries and premiers. In the Indo-Pak context, to a large extent, bilateral dialogues on various issues have been clubbed into the category of composite dialogue (CD).

On paper, the CDs have remained comprehensive. To be fair to the respective bureaucracies leading these dialogues, the CDs since the late 1990s have attempted to address numerous issues. Though they were successful in mapping of issues under each category, they remained ineffective in terms of actual resolution. The reasons are not difficult to fathom; the respective bureaucracies that led these dialogues remained 'territorial' and could not understand larger ramifications of cordial bilateral ties. Bureaucratic DNA in South Asia suffers from a particular strain, and has been inward looking.



The CDs have also had their limitations as a formal channel of communication, and more so, as an institution of conflict resolution. Since the two countries have clubbed various issues and conduct dialogue on them together, failure in talks on one issue has had a domino effect — slowing down the entire process.

Unless the CDs are compartmentalised and it is ensured that slow progress on one issue does not affect progress on another, they will not be a viable option for conflict resolution.

Perhaps, the only exception to the above has been the regular/periodic meetings of Indus Water Commissioners. These have continued irrespective of larger bilateral relations, the status of the CDs, and the sharing of data on nuclear installations. Though, IWT meetings also have come under stress during recent months.

There have been Indo-Pak channels of communication outside formal institutions. Referred loosely as track-II, most of these dialogues have been supported by sources outside South Asia (for example, the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Germany), and have been seen with an apprehension by the two states. While some of these dialogues were comprehensive, others were focussed on specific issues such as nuclear and military cooperation, water and Afghanistan.

Some track-II dialogues (for example the Chaophraya and Ottawa dialogues) had met on a regular basis, even during difficult circumstances. Led by big names on both sides, these dialogues featured former bureaucrats, retired military officials, academics, and media professionals. While track II dialogue is a useful resource, unfortunately, Indo-Pak bureaucracies tend to listen little to external input, even if it is projected through their former secretaries and retired military officials.

Unlike the West, our bureaucracies are not known for consulting outside resources — both formally and informally. As a result, the track-II channels remain under-utilised. If the track-II has difficulty even in finding an effective opening into respective ministries, it is highly unlikely that they would reach the prime ministers' offices. As a result, given the present structure of interaction between the state and track-II channels, the latter has limited use for the Indo-Pak prime ministers.

Outside the organised track-II, there is a larger civil society initiative; led by few bilateral forums that remain less organised and meet occasionally at the Wagha border. Certainly, the Indo-Pak prime ministers cannot consider using these initiatives for any communication.

Given the effectiveness of track-I led by the CDs and the limited reach of track-II, do back channels provide a viable option at the highest levels?

While one is not sure what was discussed between Mr Sharif and Jindal, it is useful to look into back channel as an option. Given the level of discussions between Niaz Naik and RK Mishra in the late 1990s, one can say that a silent channel led by few trusted people of the prime ministers could break the ice. Unfortunately both Naik and Mishra are not around, but there have been detailed interviews, especially given by Naik, now available in the public domain, on what issues were discussed, and on the level of trust and focus.

Of course, back channel diplomacy has its own weaknesses as well. The bureaucracies that remain territorial are not likely to see the back channel with an open mind. The security establishments also are likely to remain wary of such one-to-one Indo-Pak dialogue answerable only to the prime ministers. Reports and discussions show how back channels have been disrupted by officials. In India, there is a suspicion that whenever there are back channel efforts between the two countries certain state and non-state actors in Pakistan cause this disruption. For example, incidents like the recent brutal killing of Indian soldiers or the attack on Pathankot in 2016 are seen as deliberate attempts by actors inside Pakistan to scuttle a direct communication between the two prime ministers.

Outside the above, the media and political parties also suddenly get interested in being 'democratic' (in terms of the back channels being discussed or approved by the Parliament) and 'transparent' (in terms of the public's right to know what is being discussed).

Given the limitations of track-I and track-II dialogues, perhaps it is useful to invest in silent back channel diplomacy in Indo-Pak context. Let us not demonise this option.

This article is part of a commentary series trying to find few “Big Ticket Items” and “Low Hanging Fruits” in the Indo-Pak context. The author is a Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) Bangalore. He edits annual titled Armed Conflicts in South Asia and runs a portal on Pakistan — www.pakistanreader.org