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India-Pakistan Dilemma: To Talk or Not to Talk

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August 2013 was a bad month for India-Pakistan amity. Sixty-six years ago that month British India was bifurcated into two independent and sovereign countries: India and Pakistan. That partition was accompanied by unspeakable violence. As the writer Sadat Hasan Manto poignantly describes in his remarkable short story, '*Toba Tek Singh*', also utter and inhuman mindlessness. The feelings that occasion generated were bred of deep-seated distrust. Thereafter, it led to several bloody wars between the two nations. To this day the strength and power of those negative sentiments have not fully abated. However, from time to time silver linings do appear amidst the dark clouds. One such example lay in the immediate aftermath of Nawaz Sharif's assumption of office as Prime Minister of Pakistan in June this year. But, sadly, like others before it, it was soon to be engulfed in the gathering storm. To the olive branch that Nawaz Sharif then held out, the reaction of his Indian counterpart, Manmohan Singh, was positive. For a brief shining moment, hope appeared to have surfaced, but only to be submerged once again in a sea of mutual recrimination.

Bad moments do not come singly. In the first half of August five Indian soldiers died of shots fired in anger from across the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan denied involvement, hinting at terrorists outside its Army's ambit. Repeated exchanges of fire ensued. The ceasefire agreement of 2003 appeared to have been thrown to the winds. Jingoism reigned supreme in electronic talk shows in both India and Pakistan. It was unabashedly tinged with war-mongering. Each side claimed to have lost patience with the

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other. Armchair security experts began to make clarion calls for retaliatory and retributive action. It seemed that truth was not the only casualty of the conflict. So was reason.

Travails on Both Sides

For Manmohan Singh it was not a pleasant time. He paid a price for keeping his cool, and as his detractors alleged, for his perceived inaction. His Independence Day speech on 15 August, a normally apolitical event usually designed to reflect national unity, drew flak from his current electoral nemesis, Narendra Modi. The irrepressible Chief Minister of Gujarat, the *primus inter pares* among the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership, also a prime ministerial aspirant, subjected Singh to trenchant criticism for his apparent docility. To him, the Prime minister should be made of much sterner stuff. It also showed that in politics dare can often have a premium over decency.

Singh's discomfitures seemed to mount relentlessly. The rupee was in a tailspin. Good news from the US economy quickly translated into bad news for India. Investors pulled funds out of India to park in a recovering Western economy. These, added to the lack of stomach to implement reforms, caused the economy to hit a new low. The rate of growth slumped to 4.5%. This was half of what it was during the halcyon days of reforms. The visions of 'incredible India' were dimming fast. These did not help matters.

To compound the travails, a tragic naval accident in Mumbai witnessed the explosion on board and thereafter the sinking of a submarine, *Sindhurakshak*. All 18 sailors in the vessel were killed. It was the worst naval tragedy in years. It shocked the nation. Defence Minister A K Antony was no Mark Antony, and his explanations satisfied very few. Analysts revisited, with understanding cynicism, the comment of the Harvard economist Lance Prichett that India was a 'flailing state'. It meant that the head (Centre) was misaligned vis-à-vis the rest of the body (the States) causing the nation to 'flail about' in an uncoordinated fashion. The reference was obviously to poor governance. Yet another rape case was reported, this time in Mumbai, normally considered a safe place for women, this time of a journalist, shredding the already battered reputation of personal safety into tatters. The writer Gurcharan Das argued vehemently in favour of a 'liberal case for a strong State', as India, as he saw it, was a private success but a public failure, growing only at night, when an incompetent government slept!

The story emanating from Pakistan was no better: this, despite a good beginning by the new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He sent out positive feelers to India, selected a responsible President, hosted a good visit by the US Secretary of State John Kerry, made a wise choice for the Chief Minister of Balochistan, did not impede – despite an opportunity – the formation of government by Imran Khan's *Tehreek-e-Insaf*, and the like. But then suddenly hell seemed to break loose. The extremists and the Taliban had had enough of restraint. Explosions and killings resumed with astounding ferocity. In one incident, a single person held centre-stage in the Islamabad for hours, by wielding a gun and holding his own family hostage. He demanded Islamic *Sharia* laws for the country, and added the dismissal of the

government, for good measure. He was finally shot and taken prisoner. The energy situation failed to improve. Also, the overall economy. The Army, after a short and appropriate display of tolerance of Sharif's initial 'peace politics', was soon advising the slowing down of rapprochement with India and Afghanistan. This could cause Sharif to be cautious with the Army. Its current chief, Ashfaq Kayani, is due to retire in November. Rather than choose the next most-senior general as his successor, as would have been seen as the norm, Sharif, it is being said, may be looking down the pecking order to choose someone he is more comfortable with. This could be problematic for the future, as the past would tend to show. With the border conflict with India escalating, so are the strident calls by the hawks on both sides that a planned meeting in New York, come September, on the sidelines of the regular United Nations session, between the two Prime Ministers be called off.

A Window Ajar for Talks

That would be a mistake. Though Singh is at the end of his current prime ministerial term, Sharif is anxious for the meeting for symbolic reasons. The public on both sides are weary of conflict. Their leaderships should cash in on this sentiment. As a positive gesture Pakistan has announced the release of 367 Indian prisoners it has been holding. War between the two is no longer an option. Both sides being nuclear powers, neither side can win a total war, 'Mutually Assured Destruction' of both being a possibility. Testing of conventional capabilities at lower levels would be dangerous, as the risk of escalation to qualitatively higher levels of conflict would be very high. A bloodied history and an arguably dubious 'command and control capabilities' combine to create a situation where an Armageddon cannot be ruled out. This is not a risk worth taking. The nuclear deterrence in South Asia is still brittle. This is a reality that cannot be wished away.

It is, therefore, better to talk, and continue to talk if initial talks fail. This calls for the kind of patience for peace that Robert Bruce displayed with regard to war. One notable factor in the current India-Pakistan spat is the palpable goodwill of the political masters directly involved, on both sides. The two, Sharif and Singh, are not gladiatorial by nature. Not to meet in New York would be missing out on this advantage. This they, the region, and indeed the world, can ill afford. In a relationship where windows of opportunity are so few and far between, it would be unwise to ignore even one that is slightly ajar.

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