

# India, Pakistan on the Road to Peace

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Global Research, March 09, 2021

[Indian Punchline](#) 8 March 2021

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*Opportunities missed and opportunities seized in the chronicle of international diplomacy in modern history provide two outstanding illustrative examples.*

After centuries of enmity and the colossal destruction inflicted by two devastating world wars in the last century, France and Germany seize an opportunity to turn a new page in their relations, which eventually blossomed into the European Union and is today a major factor of peace and stability in Europe.

Equally, on the contrary, the catastrophic failure of the West to consolidate the peace dividends of the end of the Cold War by inviting Russia into a “common European home” (to borrow Mikhail Gorbachev’s memorable words) is threatening to possibly trigger a new cold war or even morph into hostilities.

Today, India and Pakistan are also poised on a threshold of similar Big History in the region. Seizing the emergent opportunities could make all the difference. Both countries are endowed with abundant diplomatic talent to perceive this reality that is still below the radar.

The imperatives of development are increasingly felt in both countries in their post-pandemic mindset, which is also leading to a new awakening that there is nothing like absolute security in the life of nations.

Without doubt, the US Special Representative on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad’s call with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Sunday can lead to a passage opening into a “rose-garden”. The timing of Khalilzad’s call needs to be understood properly. He is on a regional tour that has already taken him to Kabul and Doha and is arriving in Islamabad later today. In Kabul, he had met with President Ashraf Ghani and other Afghan statesmen and in Doha he confabulated with senior Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

Khalilzad has unveiled in Kabul a [US plan about a “participatory government”](#) to be formed in Afghanistan as an interim arrangement of six months for the drafting of a new constitution leading to a final settlement. In a swift follow-up, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken with Ghani and since addressed a letter to him (and to Abdullah Abdullah).

[Blinken’s letter](#) is in public domain and in it the US proposes, amongst other things, to

convene under the UN auspices a meeting of foreign ministers and envoys from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the US to discuss a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan.

The intention behind it is to legitimise the transfer of power to an interim government in Kabul on the lines of the 2001 Bonn conference that paved the way for the transition following the removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The good part is that despite the testy equations currently among and betwixt the US, Russia and China and the US-Iranian atomic tango, there is a broad international recognition that the Taliban should form part of any inclusive government in Kabul in the prevailing conditions when they control half of Afghanistan.

As in 2001-2002, when the so-called Northern Alliance set-up that seized Kabul following the Taliban's removal from power needed some robust persuasion to agree to give way peacefully to the interim government under Hamid Karzai, [a similar piquant situation arises](#) today with Ghani and his faction ensconced in power adamantly digging in and will need to be brought down to terra firma so that the pace process can be pushed through.

This is where the opportunity arises for India. Conceivably, there are only a handful of world capitals that wield the degree of influence over Ghani (and his close circle of security czars) as New Delhi does. Suffice to say, India finds in the same situation as 19 years ago when at Bonn, it was called upon by Washington to persuade the Northern Alliance to move over and accept Karzai's interim leadership.

The Vajpayee government in 2001 was eager to be helpful in Bonn sensing how much it mattered to the George W Bush administration reeling under the trauma of the 9/11 attacks. But then, India wasn't a mentor of the Northern Alliance government (led by Burhanuddin Rabbani) as it is today in providing rock solid support to Ghani. Besides, from the Indian perspective, Karzai and Taliban are like cheese and chalk.

Truly, India's Afghan policy is at a cross-roads. The criticality of the opportunity to be seized in the upcoming Afghan transition cannot be understated. It is a historic opportunity not only to recalibrate India's Afghan policies and bring them in sync with the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) but also to transform the climate of India-Pakistan relationship.

A constructive Indian role in the Afghan transition facilitating the formation of an interim government in Kabul that includes Taliban can be tuned into a profound confidence-building measure vis-a-vis Pakistan. Simply put, such an Indian role can complement the recent India-Pakistan ceasefire agreement and create underpinning to put a moratorium on cross-border activities altogether that has inflicted countless bleeding wounds on each other's body polity through the past several years and brought no tangible benefits to either side.

The point is, if a beginning is to be made to cut the Gordian knot of India-Pakistan relations, the first move could be by removing the Afghan problem from their cauldron of contentious issues. Pakistan has vital security interests in having a friendly government in Kabul, which are no less compelling than, say, India's concerns in having a friendly cooperative Nepal, which has an open border with our country.

Of course, such a first step to harmonise over Afghanistan cannot be a substitute for India-Pakistan bilateral dialogue, but it will help matters. It is no coincidence that Ambassador

Riaz Mohammad Khan, a former foreign secretary of Pakistan, wrote an op-ed yesterday titled [Kashmir talks: reality & myth](#), which concluded that “If ever diplomacy revives for a (Kashmir) peace plan, its contours will be no different than those outlined through the 2005-06 effort. Political realities and demography impose limits on what diplomacy can achieve.”

For the benefit of the uninitiated, Ambassador Riaz Khan is a highly respected figure who had played a key role at a somewhat similar defining moment in regional politics in negotiating the so-called Geneva accords that led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops in Afghanistan in 1989.

The prospects are brighter than ever that an orderly Afghan transition in the coming weeks or months is entirely conceivable. A constructive role by India in this process would not only safeguard its security interests but also could provide the opportunity to engage with the Taliban for crafting a forward-looking relationship based on mutual trust and mutual respect. Trust Pakistan not to meddle with such a positive scenario.

The road ahead will be long and winding and much resistance can be expected from the high-flying “hawks” in our skies. But that should not deter the policymakers from planning a road map with the “big picture” in mind. Logically, the time is approaching for India to give thought to resuscitating the SAARC at an early opportunity so that any India-Pakistan bilateral processes would also get synergy from regional cooperation.

The bottom line is that India needs to foster a sense of urgency, a new way of thinking that gives precedence to the resolution and not simply the management of conflict situations, to avoid disaster rather than merely dealing with its consequences, to be able to prioritise the national agenda of development that ought to have precedence over all other sideshows in our country’s current history.

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