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Some Reflections on the India–Pakistan Binary and De-Securitisation

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“Pakistan has made a horrible mess of itself, almost as if, because it wants to be the antithesis of India, it must embrace failure if India is a success. So it sinks into hell, rises into chaos, and many Indians gloat over its agony as the wages of sin. It is easy to hate Pakistan, even easier now to sneer at it, but loathing cannot form policy, any more than an unrequited love can. Sadly though, policy on Pakistan is often made either by the raptors or by the rapt.

The raptors—the hawks of Lutyens Delhi—are fearful pests, rising on hot air to great heights, where they go around in circles and shriek. But ask what India should do, and the hawk on Pakistan turns out to be not the hawk of falconry, but the hawk-and-spit, expectoration passed off as policy, or of the hawk-and-sell, the devious flogging of the shoddy and the squalid. Cursed with both a north and a south block, it is dense and costive, so nothing goes in and nothing comes out. If the hawk has its reasons, reason cannot understand them.

—Satyabrata Pal (*d.* 2019), former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan (2006–09) (*S Pak, Engaging Pakistan, India Quarterly, Volume 65, No. 4 (2009), pp. 361–371.*)

The Engagement Disengagement Binary

The India–Pakistan binary of “Engagement–Disengagement” would sum up a major stream of the diplomatic history of the subcontinent in the past quarter century. In this period, India has had six prime ministers, five different governments and seven general elections. Virtually every part of the political spectrum of the country has, at some point of time in this period, either formed the government or been in it as part of a coalition or a supporter.

In the same period in Pakistan, there have been 10 prime ministers and five general elections. In between 1999–2008, there was a near decade-long period of military rule. Again, as in the case of India, over this quarter century, virtually the entire political spectrum of Pakistan has been associated with government, in one form or the other.

The “engagement–disengagement” binary has very evidently a structural basis.

It is also a fact that the engagement–disengagement binary has intensified in both directions over time. The greater the intensity of engagement, equally significant and fraught has been the disengagement that followed. The Lahore Bus Initiative was followed by Kargil, the Agra summit followed by the attack on our Parliament, the CBM/structured dialogue process of 2004–2008 was severely undermined with the Mumbai terrorist attack of November 2008 and the Pathankot attack in January 2016 followed the Prime Minister’s visit to Lahore a few days earlier. There could be other instances also.

It is also interesting that a new initiative with reference to engagement, or for that matter, disengagement, has not been a consequence of political change in terms of a new government reversing the policies of its predecessor. Engagement, disengagement and engagement again has characterized policies of the same government. The NDA under Prime Minister Vajpayee from 1998 to 2004 went from engagement to disengagement to engagement to disengagement and ended its tenure at a high note of engagement. This diplomacy encapsulated a tumultuous history through the Lahore bus initiative, Kargil, the hijacking of IC 814, the Agra Summit, the attack on our Parliament, Operation Parakaram and the Islamabad Summit. The UPA I disengaged following the Mumbai serial blasts of July 2006 but reversed that course by instituting the Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism. Such examples can be cited up to now, for example, the opening of the Kartarpur corridor in the midst of a high period of India–Pakistan tension.

There are different takeaways from this narrative chronology and the conclusion drawn or the principle extracted varies depending on points of view held. To some, the problem lies in embarking upon a process of engagement in the first place even at a cost of compromising on core principles—thus the enormity of Kargil and the hijacking of IC 814 were put aside and General Musharraf invited to Agra; after the attack on Parliament and Operation Parakaram a hand of friendship was again extended; the thread of engagement was picked up post the Mumbai attack of November 2008, etc. (Incidentally in Pakistan, there are similar views: these boil down to the question of how to accord primacy to Kashmir in any India–Pakistan engagement.)

In this view, given the history of India-Pakistan engagement, it is a form of lunacy to persist with or embark upon engagement knowing that disengagement following a breakdown is inevitable. This conclusion is also derived from what is believed to be the very nature or constitution of Pakistan—an analysis similar to that of A.J.P. Taylor, for example, with regard to Germany through most of the 20th century. Epigrams, some well known, he crafted seemingly have a resonance in the India-Pakistan context too: “Every German frontier is artificial, therefore impermanent; that is the permanence of German geography”, or, “The German character was determined by their geopolitical position”, etc. A critique of engagement with Pakistan is thus also often based on similar analysis with reference to “essentialist” features of Pakistan.

Another critique of engagement is the consistency argument. This is that political initiatives are inconsistent with government’s prevailing narrative—thus the initiative that culminated in PM Vajpayee’s historic visit to Lahore in January 2004 was inconsistent with the policy adopted after the attack on our Parliament in 2001; the opening of the Kartarpur corridor was inconsistent with the stated fundamentals guiding policy then of isolating Pakistan, talks and terror cannot coexist, etc. Such critiques of political initiatives to overcome an India-Pakistan paralysis have a long history. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and K. C. Neogy resigned from the Union Cabinet in April 1950 following the Nehru-Liaquat Pact on minorities in Bengal; Atal Bihari Vajpayee led a protest against the Simla Agreement; and there are many other examples. In each case, there was a robust counter critique. The strongest defence of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact in the weeks immediately after its conclusion came from the then Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, and this defence was made first not in Delhi but rather in Calcutta—Shyama Prasad Mukherjee’s city and the site where the Pact was most discussed and debated. Vajpayee was to himself critique his criticism of the Simla Agreement and he mounted his defence of the pact in Islamabad when he travelled there as Foreign Minister of India’s first non-Congress government in 1978.

Whatever may be the disagreements between the respective protagonists in the Engagement-Disengagement binary, there is generally a consensus on the reason why processes of engagement have ended. These reasons are obvious and self-evident. Political initiatives ended repeatedly on the anvil of political and institutional instability in Pakistan or more specifically when civil-military tensions in Pakistan moved up a few notches. Thus, the Lahore Bus Initiative that led to the famous Lahore Declaration and MOU was undermined by Pakistani military adventurism in Kargil reflecting the fact that the interface

between PM Nawaz Sharif and Gen. Pervez Musharraf had become unworkable. Those critical of political initiatives and engagement could very well argue that this was predictable and therefore a high profile initiative was an unnecessary risk. Indeed, there were many who made precisely this point even as the initiative rolled out and later felt vindicated as the scale of the intrusion in Kargil became clear.

This point, regardless of the vehemence and passion that ‘bad faith’ inevitably generates, however, misses the specific context in which the Lahore Bus Initiative was taken. This was a post May 1998 decision with both India and Pakistan now declared nuclear weapon states. Secondly, in the period immediately preceding and unrelated to the nuclear issue, something unusual appeared to be happening in Pakistan: The Prime Minister seemed, after a very long period, actually to be in charge, having replaced an incumbent Chief of Army Staff, Chief Justice and President. These two factors explain much of Indian diplomacy of the time and an objective post mortem will have to take that into account.

We encounter similar situations nearer our own time. In 2014—around the time the new NDA government was sworn in—Pakistan was again at an interesting juncture. Recently-elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had appointed a trusted follower as President and the long-serving army Chief and Chief Justice had finally retired. This provides the context to situate the initiatives to engage with Pakistan and to persist with that engagement for the next two years. This was despite the fact that Pakistan’s lack of internal coherence was to reassert itself strongly through this period and in its wake followed the ingress of the army. This undermined whatever steps were taken by India but the point remains of an overall context in which political initiatives of the kind that were taken made eminent sense.

The Regional Context

However tempting it may be to do so, it is important to resist seeing India-Pakistan relations on a standalone basis. The relationship has always been part of a wider context of regional and international forces. These sometimes nuance bilateral relations and sometimes affect them deeply—but their influence cannot be underestimated.

The year 1979 is significant in India-Pakistan history and a great deal that happened subsequently is traced back to it. The execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the consolidation of power by General Zia-ul-Haq and his drift to Islamism are important milestones of this period in Pakistan. In India, the first non-Congress

government since 1947 ended and in the elections that followed the Congress came back. Each of these internal factors did weigh on bilateral relations but it was the regional and international context that was the more significant determinant. The revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the cementing of a US-China concert all meant that the politics and conflicts of the Cold War would also play a major role in sub-continental politics and India-Pakistan relations. Another year of tectonic shifts was 1989 with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the coming down of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in Europe. It is not a coincidence that the present insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir dates back to that time with all its attendant ramifications for India-Pakistan relations. 9/11, the global financial crisis, the political assertion of China alongside the crystallization of a Pak-China nexus over the past decade are international factors that have moulded India-Pakistan relations over the past two decades. Regionally, the situation in Afghanistan, greater proximity between India and the Gulf states, the emergence of a robust Russia-China interface, all have similarly impacted bilateral relations. This is not to deny the role of strictly bilateral developments such as a terrorist attack in triggering a crisis. The point however is to keep the larger context of policy formulation constantly in view.

Desecuritization as a Policy Approach

Is it feasible to envisage an India-Pakistan relationship that is desecuritized, if not wholly at least partially or significantly? Unless realism is abandoned to a great degree, the difficulties in this are self-evident. Some aspects of the India-Pakistan relationship resemble other chronically or excessively securitized neighbourhood situations—North and South Korea or Israel and some of its Arab neighbours. There are differences of course—principally that is neither of these two cases are dramatic crests and troughs as visible as in the India-Pakistan case. This is evidently because there is a latent potential for desecuritization although this potential exists alongside numerous pitfalls and dangers. Together—the potential and the dangers—also explain the crests and troughs that have marked India-Pakistan relations over the decades.

In the period after the Pathankot airbase terrorist attack (January 2016), India-Pakistan relations moved into a new phase. The process of how this happened is well known and need not be recapitulated in detail. The principal milestones of the process follow from the major terrorist attacks on Indian security forces in Uri (September 2016) and Pulwama (February 2019). The feature that emerged thereafter was that kinetic responses would acquire a strategic dimension

in terms of signalling both to Pakistan and to domestic public opinion the postures of the Government of India with regard to the threat of terrorist attacks from Pakistan.

Even in so highly securitized a relationship over the past 70 years, this phase has been unusual in terms of both its intensity and duration. At the same time, despite this period of high tension and poor atmospherics, a significant bilateral measure in the form of the opening of the Kartarpur Saheb corridor (November 2019) was put in place. A step that would have been difficult to take in the best of times was taken at the near worst of times. Another point of importance merits mention. Significant breakthroughs of this kind in the past are associated with periods of upswings in bilateral relations—the Kokrahar-Munabao Rail Link in 2006 or the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad Bus Service in 2005 for instance; both took place at a time when India-Pakistan relations were looking better than they had for decades, perhaps ever, and constructive engagement was at a high. The fact that a long-standing demand—considered and not found possible to implement many times earlier—of the Sikh community would be agreed to and implemented by both governments at a time of very high tension when their relations were minimal is thus both unusual and significant.

The primacy to kinetic operations in overall policy towards Pakistan and the opening of the Kartarpur corridor sum up in fact all the perplexities of neighbourhood policy.

It is too early to envisage what a post-corona world would be like and the extent to which traditional geopolitics would be impacted by the fallout of the pandemic. That there will be change is certain. Just as terrorism was imprinted on the geopolitical agenda post 9/11, we can expect the pandemic to leave some kind of impression also. What that will be cannot be said with precision but we can guess its broad contours in general terms. What we can say with some measure of certainty is that we are now moving into a realm where non-traditional security has moved up some notches in terms of mental space occupied and therefore in settling governmental and global priorities. This is not to postulate a retreat of traditional geopolitics but only that non-traditional security issues will now play a somewhat more enlarged role than hitherto in global and regional politics.

How would this change impact India-Pakistan relations and would it impart to them a trajectory of de-securitization? It is hazardous to make predictions about any aspect of this particular relationship. Nevertheless even at this early stage, the tea leaves can be read. It is surely no coincidence that the moribund SAARC suddenly received a leg up with the outset of the pandemic in South

Asia. This reassertion of its intrinsic narrative value suggests in fact the more general trend—the insertion of the realm of non-traditional security into that of geopolitics. The fact also is that the course of the Covid pandemic so far has shown up severe deficiencies and shortcomings in both India and Pakistan not just of health infrastructure but also fundamental governance issues.

Public health issues are in fact an unexplored terrain in the India-Pakistan interface. As compared to other areas in the non-traditional security domain, they have a certain advantage in that they are relatively distanced or insulated from spillover effects of traditional geopolitical divides. In brief, health issues do not appear to have the political ramifications associated with issues of water security or scarcity, glacial melt, environmental pollution, etc., which have generally come in the way of India and Pakistan developing a workable agenda on non-traditional security.

So light has been placed on existing global priorities and infirmities. How sustained and how intense the consequential shift will be is more difficult to say. It certainly will not mean that traditional geopolitics will disappear—that does not happen in the real world.

No matter what the contours of the post-Covid world are, it will still remain a security-dominated world. But some moving up in the priority list of non-traditional security issues, including public health, can be expected. Not surprisingly, the onset of the pandemic in South Asia saw the assertion of the narrative value of SAARC and that through cooperation in the health sector.

How will this reordering impact, if at all, on historically so heavily securitized a relationship such as India-Pakistan? Over the past seven decades there have been three principal attempts to desecuritize the India-Pakistan agenda. This has been attempted through introducing elements from the non-traditional security domain principally as a means of reducing the intensity of existing differences. Two of these were failures; one was, relatively speaking, a greater success. The success story was in the division of the Indus system of rivers through a treaty that pragmatically ring fenced river waters sharing from all the other contestations of India-Pakistan geopolitics including Jammu and Kashmir. This ring fencing could not however be enlarged or deepened largely as a result of the political turn Pakistan took post 1965 and especially after 1989.

The two failures were in the field of energy—represented by the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline—and economics: the prolonged suboptimal levels of trade ending finally in a lock jam in 2019 which will require great skill of political initiative to undo. The reasons for the failures are obvious enough: the IPI gas

pipeline proved to be a bridge too far because of the difficulties in combining India-Pakistan issues with the geopolitics of Iran. The trade initiative was also full of promise but faced the problem that the two economies are basically competitive rather than complementary and the difference in size meant that balance of trade issues acquired greater prominence than would have been otherwise.

Other domains of non-traditional security—climate change, glacial melt, water availability, environmental pollution—have developed only a limited traction in the India-Pakistan context largely because these spill over into the domain of traditional geopolitics and security issues. This means a burden too heavy for the science involved to bear on its own.

Why should the Covid-19 pandemic then suggest the possibilities of desecuritized elements being introduced in the India-Pakistan agenda? Principally, because it is classically ‘non traditional’, not having a direct relationship with shifts in the traditional arenas of the India-Pakistan polemic which allows a certain potential and protection similar to that of a largely forgotten area of India-Pakistan cooperation—Locusts. Cooperation in this sector has been low key, largely unnoticed but significantly continuous and uninterrupted.

From early this year, the Food and Agriculture Organization has been warning of a humanitarian crisis on account of locusts across East Africa and the Horn of Africa reaching through West Asia to south Pakistan and north-west India. Locusts attack crops and therefore directly impact food security of the affected area. Press reports have been quoting government officials in Sindh in Pakistan as this being the worst infestation in three decades and World Bank officials talk of a possible twin crisis—a combined Covid-19 and locust outbreak. If the epicentre for the latter appears to be East Africa, the impact will be felt as far east as South Asia. Some weeks before the full impact of the corona virus was visible, Pakistan had in fact declared a “national emergency” to deal with the locust threat. In India, the border areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan may also face an onslaught later in the year.

What is interesting, however, is the below-the-radar cooperation and exchange of information that traditionally takes place between border districts in India and Pakistan to combat this menace. Through the worst of the India-Pakistan crisis in the past two decades and even earlier, locust officers have met frequently and regularly, akin to the meetings of the Indus Waters Commission ring fenced from the larger politics of India-Pakistan issues. The FAO plays a facilitator’s role in this and provides a convenient multilateral umbrella as a cover for this

exercise to have continued year in and out through the multiple crises and clashes between the two countries. A seldom cited source for continuous India-Pakistan dialogue that leapfrogs the disengagement engagement binary is a section in the FAO website that will reveal to the interested researcher the minutes of all India-Pakistan meetings on combating locusts, regularly held over the decades.

In brief, what the locust example shows is that in certain areas of non-traditional security, insulated from other contested arenas, sustained cooperation is possible. In the desert that otherwise characterizes India-Pakistan diplomacy, this means a very high mark. Of course, locusts and the corona virus are different. The former is not restricted by national boundaries while the latter is and can be with restrictions on physical movement of people. Nevertheless, both inhabit the domain of non-traditional security and if there is one lesson from this pandemic which will be learnt globally is that this domain is too vital to be left alone. A de-securitisation agenda, no matter how ambitious, will always have its well-defined parameters and limits given the levels of mistrust between India and Pakistan and the weight of the unresolved issues that divide them. Yet to consciously embark on to this terrain seems inescapably in our national interest. To do so would however require some amount of reorientation of our own mindsets and this is where the observations of the late Shri Satyabrata Pal cited at the beginning of this essay merit recall.