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Nothing official about people

I know how critical the issue of Pakistan is for India, having been affected by it since childhood. My mother, a Hindu Sindhi, had a close shave when she fled Pakistan during the Partition.

I have closely watched the Indo-Pak issue for over 50 years, and am dismayed to see that even after 60 years, it is no closer to resolution. It remains one of the few frozen bilateral relationships, with several ups and downs but no clear trajectory towards a solution. The question I keep asking is whether there is any parallel challenge that could provide a lesson.

My hunt brought me closer to one: the China-Taiwan relationship. I put forward this parallel with great trepidation because it could be misunderstood by both India and China. I also know the significant differences. While China and Taiwan claim to represent the same country, India and Pakistan don't. Pakistan could be offended with this comparison. It's a sovereign, independent State and a UN member. Taiwan is not. Despite these differences, there may be a few similarities.

Taiwan has consumed much energy and attention of the Chinese leadership as Pakistan has India's. China and Taiwan have not gone to war but the potential for war has been high at significant moments of their history. India and Pakistan have gone to war thrice. In both cases, the relationship has often been a zero-sum game. For most of the time, the two relationships have been tense and adversarial.

Sixty years ago, when both issues surfaced, most observers would have predicted that the India-Pakistan issue would be resolved before the China-Taiwan one. Thus, it's surprising that the latter seems closer today to a long-term resolution than the former. This is happening despite the fact that the last two Presidents of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian and Lee Teng-hui had been secretly (or, perhaps, not so secretly) pursuing an 'independence' strategy, which infuriated the leaders in Beijing. Paradoxically, the Beijing leaders preferred the Kuomintang (KMT) rulers even though they claimed China. Despite their long rivalry, both the Communist Party of China (CPC) and KMT agreed that China and Taiwan belonged to one country.

So why is the China-Taiwan issue closer to a resolution? Simply because China has pursued a two-pronged approach towards Taiwan, which I would crudely summarise as follows: squeeze Taiwan politically in international politics, embrace Taiwan economically in cross-strait relations. Hence, even in the very difficult years of Chen Shui-bian and Lee Teng-hui (when China and the US actually came close to a military confrontation in the Taiwan Straits in March 1996), China did not stop its people-to-people or economic exchanges with Taiwan.

The China-Taiwan and Indo-Pak economic relationships are worth comparing. In both cases, for a long time trade and investment relations were discouraged. Yet, after China opened its economy to the world, it also welcomed Taiwanese investment and trade with Taiwan. Both have grown significantly. Bilateral trade between China and Taiwan increased phenomenally from \$4 billion in 1990 to 130.2 billion in 2007. Taiwanese investment in China has also grown phenomenally, and is estimated to be between \$150-300 billion. Consequently, the growing and irrevocable economic interdependence and integration between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait has laid a solid foundation for political stability and eventual solution.

India opened its economy to the world in 1991 under the leadership of Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. Since then its trade and investment links with the rest of the world have exploded. India's total trade with the world has grown by more than 7 times, from \$46 billion in 1991 to about \$320 billion in 2007. Foreign Direct Investment in India grew from \$0.54 billion in 1991 to \$56 billion in 2007. Only one major economic relationship has not kept step with this explosion: the India-Pakistan one. Total trade between them in 1991 was less than \$100 million. In 2007, it reached \$1,130 million, growing more than 11 times. In comparison, in the same period, China - Taiwan trade grew by more than 30 times. India has given Pakistan most favoured nation (MFN) status. Pakistan hasn't reciprocated.

At the people-to-people level, there's been a remarkable growth in the number of Taiwanese visiting and living in, China. The latest statistics show that the number of annual visits made by Taiwanese citizens to China shot up from 437,000 in 1988 to 4.6 million in 2007, over ten times. There are over one million Taiwanese living and working in China today. Remarkably, this dramatic growth occurred despite the lack of direct air or sea links between China and Taiwan until July 2008. Indeed, the Taiwanese had to fly to Hong Kong first, before flying to China, like Indians and Pakistanis have to first fly to Dubai.

It isn't difficult to imagine the same growth in people-to-people contacts between India and Pakistan. Just as the Chinese and Taiwanese share a common culture and language (Mandarin), so do Indians and Pakistanis (Hindi/Urdu). Having attended several international gatherings, I have been struck by the high degree of socio-cultural comfort between Indian and Pakistani participants. Pakistanis watch Hindi movies. Indians watch Pakistani soap operas. This may explain why they naturally gravitate towards each other. Sadly, it is difficult for Indians and Pakistanis to get visas to visit each other.

Having observed how well Indians and Pakistanis get along at most international fora, I'm often left wondering why the government-to-government relationship remains relatively bad. After watching the constant political discomfort between India and Pakistan, I came to the conclusion that one practical step that both sides can take is to de-link the people-to-people links from official relations. One should not be held hostage to the other. And, if as a result of this detachment, there is a natural explosion of people - to - people links, it is conceivable that the India - Pakistan relationship could also be put on the same positive trajectory as the China - Taiwan relationship. Or is it too perilous to even suggest this?

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