

Visit of Indian Parliamentarians Islamabad, 26-27 May 2011

Report

The Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs organized a two-day meeting of Indian and Pakistani parliamentarians in Islamabad on 26-27 May 2011. *This was the first ever all-MPs Indian delegation to visit Pakistan to advance the process of peace-building in the region.*

The purpose of this meeting was to encourage representatives of the people of India and Pakistan to discuss and better understand the various outstanding issues between the two countries, and to find ways and means to resolve these conflicts. This visit was a direct outcome of suggestions made by participants in earlier Pugwash meetings between India and Pakistan.^[1] The Indian delegation was led by Prof. Saifuddin Soz, former Federal Minister for Water Resources and current member of the Indian Parliament.

Summary of key points and recommendations

- Participants urged greater cooperation and further working meetings between parliamentarians of the two countries. This current initiative was seen as a landmark initiative in this respect;
- Legislation that would allow a better human and cultural interchange between India and Pakistan could be further explored;
- There was shared encouragement for strong political leadership to further develop dialogue and cooperation between the two countries. Legislators on both sides were encouraged to interact frequently with government officials on these and related topics, and to bring in government officials for in camera sessions on these topics;
- Increased legal cooperation between the two countries was urged on terrorism-related cases, with attention paid to setting up requisite joint legal mechanisms;
- The role of the media in creating a counter-narrative to conflict was discussed, including the recommendation that Indian and Pakistani television channels should be broadcast in both countries;
- Additional steps for facilitating telecommunications across the borders and the line of control were urged (allowing phone roaming, supporting other social media, etc);
- Reform in the visa regime and increased air travel facilities were urged, to allow increased people-to-people contact and reunions of families and friends. Free movement for Pakistani MPs in India, in accordance with their possession of SAARC visas, was highlighted;
- Increased facilitation of cultural exchanges/visits/scholarly exchanges and contacts among educational institutions was also promoted (including, for example, meetings between Islamic scholars from the two countries);
- Relaxation of restrictions in trade and commerce were discussed;
- Relaxation of visa rules for the South Asian University students in New Delhi;
- Participants urged the two countries to work better together to address common threats. They acknowledged that the root causes of terrorism need to be better understood and addressed, and noted the important role of civil society and the media in this dialogue;
- Pugwash was encouraged to continue to organize such opportunities for interaction.

There were four major sessions in the conference:

1. Legal aspects of fighting terrorism in Pakistan;
2. Interaction of the visiting delegation with Pakistani parliamentarians and leading members of civil society;
3. Interaction of the visiting delegation with the Pakistani media; and
4. further interaction of the delegation with members of the Pakistan civil society, including approximately 30 of whom were under the age of 40.

The Need for Increased Political Engagement

Recognizing the need to continue to build on recent positive movement toward dialogue, some felt it is the politicians of India and Pakistan, not the bureaucrats, who will be able to create conditions for a solution to the India-Pakistan conflicts (including, possibly, issues related to Kashmir).

It was acknowledged that opportunity for interparliamentary discussion is rare, and such dialogue is needed to find ways to jointly address common problems. There are some hurdles to such cooperation which need attention.

It was pointed out by some Pakistani MPs that they were not allowed to travel freely within India despite SAARC visas which are supposed to entitle them to travel without restrictions. Some Indian parliamentarians pointed out that they also face such restrictions. Some felt this issue could be taken up with the Indian government as a matter of priority.

Some participants felt that MPs on both sides can facilitate forward momentum by consistently applying pressure on the respective government to make peace. MPs can call the various bureaucrats for in camera meetings and demand to know what is happening on various fronts and exert pressure on them to move forward.

Creating a Counter Narrative to Conflict – The Role of the Media

It was acknowledged by many that the peoples of the two countries have a great deal of interests in common, and that these shared interests can create the foundation for improved relations. Discussion focused on the role the traditional and new media can play in the resolution of outstanding issues, and also highlighted possible ways to create a more positive environment.

Discussion addressed the fact that the general public of Pakistan is in favour of peace with India, even as a small sub-section of the people does not want peace. Some felt the street power of this small minority should not be seen as an indication of a complete lack of the possibility of peace and friendship between the two countries, and that the media has an integral role to play in this regard.

Some felt that the Indian and Pakistani media need to exercise restraint, since the negative images that the media is creating about the other country has become one of the biggest hurdles in the way of bettering Indo-Pak relations. As a starting point, some participants felt that the *Indian and Pakistani TV channels should be shown in each other's countries.*

Some pointed out that Pakistan needs to be more transparent, open, and less defensive about the past.

Others commented that while Pakistani state and the Pakistani people want to make peace with India, resolve their issues and move forward, it is also necessary to move forward with dignity and respect. From all sides there was agreement that the outstanding problems between the two countries should not be pushed under the carpet – the problems should be honorably resolved.

Talking about perceptions of each other, it was noted that a lot of people in Pakistan think India is an existential threat. And yet it is important to note that no one has accused India of sponsoring the recent attack on the Karachi naval base.

As part of the Islamabad schedule, Indian Parliamentarians had an opportunity to interact with representatives of media houses such as Greater Kashmir, The Hindu, BBC, The Nation, CNBC, Voice of America and The News.

The Need for Increased People to People Contacts

The tremendous benefits that can come through increased people-to-people contacts were highlighted throughout the two days of discussions, including with discussions with prominent human rights, civil rights, and NGO experts. Several suggestions surfaced which could yield immediate and positive results:

Participants discussed ways to further build bridges between groups of students, athletes, cultural artists, farmers, literary personalities and peoples from other walks of life, as a way to increase understand each other's view points on various subjects and to strengthen common ties.

One of the major arguments made throughout the interaction was the need to understand the specific historical, cultural and social context within which terrorism develops. It was argued by many participants that there is no necessary linkage between terrorism and poverty and hence it was argued that it is a mindset and that it should be fought at the ideational level.

Improving Legal Aspects of Fighting Terrorism

Targeted discussion focused on the various terrorism-related cases that are under trial in many Pakistani courts and in particular the prosecution of the Mumbai terror suspects. While some from the Indian side expressed concern over the time delay of the prosecution and punishment of those accused in the Mumbai attack, some felt this perceived delay should not be seen as a stand-alone case but as a problem of the Pakistani justice system as a whole and it was noted that there has been some improvement in the trials relating to the Mumbai attacks. Pakistan has arrested those accused in the case by India and they have been formally indicted by the Pakistani government. However, some on the Pakistani side are concerned that India is providing some evidence that is inadmissible in a court of law.

The impact of the prior lack of coordination between the two countries was noted, and further increased cooperation was encouraged. For instance, the accused have been telling the Pakistani courts that they are facing double jeopardy (as they are accused both in the Indian and Pakistani courts) and the courts are likely to take a lenient view regarding the double jeopardy plea of the accused. The two countries have now started sharing more evidence and hence new evidence is coming forth, but again such evidence may not be admissible in a court of law given the time gap that has been created between the beginning of the trial and the admission of new evidence.

Some felt that more could have been done if the two countries had cooperated more fully earlier. The no-talk policy in the decisive phase post 26/11 created misunderstanding between the two countries and valuable time was lost. Similarly, periodic briefings to the Indians on the 26/11 trials by the Pakistani lawyers could have been useful. An Indian parliamentarian pointed out that the political class needs to demonstrate 'steely determination' to confront terrorism. Some suggested Pakistan could demonstrate its seriousness by solving the problem of Dawood Ibrahim.

A mutual legal assistance mechanism, whether or not under the SAARC framework, between the two countries might in future avoid some of these problems.

Some pointed out, however, that the technicalities should not detract from the need for a political and moral framework that can stop terrorism. Legal technicalities should not prevent both sides from arriving at such a solution

Moving Forward

The basic fact that surfaced throughout discussions is that there are far too many common threats between India and Pakistan and they need to fight them together and not individually. The ties that bind the two countries together are strong.

Some Indian MPs who participated in this Pugwash event expressed their belief that there has been a qualitative shift in perceptions. Participants on all sides demonstrated their convictions that great progress is possible, with continued goodwill and further interactions. There was hope that this visit signaled new possibilities for ways forward and plans are underway for the next steps of the Pugwash Track 2 initiative.

Members of the Indian Parliamentary Delegation

1. Prof. Saifuddin Soz, (Head of the Delegation), Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Indian National Congress
2. Dr. K. Keshava Rao, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Indian National Congress
3. Tariq Anwar, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Indian National Congress
4. Dr. Sudarshana Natchiappan, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Indian National Congress
5. Shariquddin Shariq, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), India. Indian National Congress
6. Shri Shadi Lal Batra, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Indian National Congress
7. Syed Azeez Pasha (coordinator of the delegation), Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Communist Party of India.
8. Shri Rajniti Prasad, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), India. Rashtriya Janata Dal
9. Mr. Madan Lal Sharma, Lok Sabha, Congress Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Jammu. Indian National Congress
10. R C Singh, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, Communist Party of India. Communist Party of India
11. V. Hanumantha Rao, Congress Member of Parliament from Andhra Pradesh. Indian National Congress

Members of the Pakistani Parliamentary Delegation

1. Ahsan Iqbal Chaudhury, Member of the National Assembly, PML-N
2. Engr. Khurram Dastagir Khan, Member of the National Assembly, PML-N
3. Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, Member of the National Assembly, PML-N
4. Shireen Arshad Khan, Member of the National Assembly, PML-N
5. Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Member of the National Assembly, PML-N (former Minister for Commerce)
6. Ms Farahnaz Ispahani, Member of the National Assembly, PPP
7. Malik Abrar Ahmad, Member of the National Assembly, PML-N
8. Dr. Tariq Fazal Chaudhary, Member of the National Assembly
9. Nadeem Afzal Gondal (Chan), Member of the National Assembly, PPP
10. Mian Abdus Sattar, Member of the National Assembly, PPP
11. Afrasiab Khattak, Senator, Pakistan
12. Marvi Memon, Member of the National Assembly, PML-Q

Other Participants

13. Amb. Shahzad Chaudhury, former Ambassador, Pakistan
14. Prof. Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Secretary General, Pugwash
15. Ejaz Haider, Journalist, Pakistan
16. Dr. Happymon Jacob, Professor, JNU, New Delhi
17. Amb. Humayun Khan, Former Foreign Secretary, Pakistan
18. Riaz Mohammad Khan
19. Lt. Gen (ret) Talat Masood, Head Pakistan Pugwash
20. Moeed Pirzada, journalist
21. Ashraf Jehangir Qasi
22. Amb. Rustum Shah Mohammad, former Ambassador
23. Ahmer Bilal Soofi, lawyer in the Supreme Court of Pakistan
24. Mosharaff Ali Zaidi, journalist

[1] The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed can be attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus, and in fact the sharing of diverse views was encouraged. The rapporteur for this report was Dr. Happymon Jacob, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The Pugwash Project on South Asia Dialogue is made possible through contributions by the US Department of State, the Ploughshares Fund, USIP, and others.

Secretary General