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The election of Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan will provide an opportunity for the improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations to continue. But don't expect dramatic results too soon; there will be a few obstacles on the road.

Background

Nawaz Sharif was inaugurated as Prime Minister of Pakistan for the third time last week, after his party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, won the largest number of seats in the National Assembly. In the lead up to the elections held on 11 May, he had made it clear that improving Indo-Pakistan relations would be an early priority for his administration. But, while high-level political will appears to be there on both sides, getting meaningful results will not be easy.

Comment

Relations between the two South Asian neighbours have never been great; however, for the last five years, under the administration of the Pakistan People’s Party, there have been improvements, albeit only small ones. Nawaz Sharif has publicly declared that he wants to build a bilateral relationship built on ‘peace, friendship and co-operation’. Accordingly, there are a number of things that his government could implement relatively easily.

These include: removal of the negative list barring the importation of some goods from India; opening up more border crossings (at present there is only the Wagah-Attari crossing); granting India MFN status; allowing the importation of all goods, in exchange for the removal of non-tariff barriers; and trade concessions from New Delhi to Pakistan. The implementation of these measures would open up the huge Indian market for Pakistani goods. In return, Indian businesses and traders would benefit from access to Pakistan’s market of close to 200 million people.

If relations are to significantly improve, however, Prime Minister Sharif will have to deal relatively early with one long-standing Indian demand. India has requested that the founder of Laskhar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hafiz Saeed, who is believed to have masterminded the LeT terrorist attack in Mumbai in 2008 (which killed over 160 people), be handed over to the Indian authorities. Although Sharif has publicly stated that, on his watch, there would be no more “Mumbais”, it is unlikely that Islamabad will agree to India’s request.

The main reason that the government will not move against Saeed, who freely moves around in Lahore, is because of the LeT’s intimate connection with the army’s powerful intelligence agency, the ISI. The ISI helped to form the LeT in the 1980s, to put pressure on the Indians in Kashmir. Accordingly, a move against Saeed by Nawaz Sharif would lead to a head-on collision with the army. Even though Sharif’s relations with the army appear to have improved lately – one must not forget that he was, after all, toppled in an army coup in 1999. Handing over Saeed would be a step too far for the generals to accept.

Moreover, given the cross-fertilisation between the LeT and the Pakistani Taliban militants (known as the TTP in Pakistan), there is a strong possibility that, were the Sharif Government to move against Saeed, the TTP would retaliate with terrorist attacks against government targets and the LeT with attacks inside India. In such a scenario, the Indian Prime Minister would be under intense pressure to take military action against Pakistan.

The other important issue that will also complicate any significant improvement in relations, is the increased security involvement of India in Afghanistan. Particularly infuriating to Pakistan, is the India-Afghanistan strategic partnership agreement, signed in 2011. This agreement includes assisting with the training, equipping and capacity building of the Afghan National Army (ANA). The training of some 25,000 ANA officers in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency in various regimental centres in India, has already begun. Moreover, during President Karzai’s visit to New Delhi in late May – the second official visit to India in six months – he put forward a wish list of military equipment that he’d like India to provide. The list includes: 105 millimetre artillery howitzers, AN32 medium-lift aircraft and trucks. In addition, there are four Indian consulates in Afghanistan, which Pakistan
believes are there to foment trouble in Pakistan’s restive western province of Baluchistan. Islamabad would like these shut down, but this is not likely to happen.

Notwithstanding the obstacles discussed above, the Indian leaders would welcome the return of Nawaz Sharif to the helm in Pakistan. It was, after all, on his watch in 1999 that the “Friendship” bus service at the Wagah border near Lahore was inaugurated and the Lahore Declaration (that seeks to avoid nuclear conflict) was signed. It was, however, also under his administration that the Kargil conflict occurred and that Pakistan detonated its first nuclear weapons. So, the track record is mixed.

Nevertheless, the atmospherics are certainly better today than 14 years ago, when General Musharraf removed Sharif from office. Furthermore, General Kayani has indicated that he supports an improvement in bilateral relations. Sharif has decided to keep the foreign affairs and defence portfolios himself – probably to try to have more control over what the military has always considered its ultimate responsibility. He will, nevertheless, have to make sure he has the military completely on side, before taking any major decision on the Pakistan-India front. He knows only too well what it is like to fall out of favour with the military.

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