

Balusa V

INDIA AND PAKISTAN:

**OPPORTUNITIES IN ECONOMIC GROWTH,
TECHNOLOGY, AND SECURITY**

**The Role of the Press in Building Support
for Improved India-Pakistan Relations**

A Report of the Balusa/Bellagio, Italy Group

by Shirin Tahir-Kheli

*Based on a conference of senior Indian, Pakistani, and U.S. participants, held at the
Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy,
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PREFACE

The Foreign Policy Research Institute was pleased to arrange a meeting of senior leaders and officials from India, Pakistan, and the United States on May 6-11, 1998, at the Rockefeller Foundation's conference center in Bellagio, Italy. FPRI would like to thank the W. Alton Jones Foundation for providing support for this conference, as well as the Rockefeller Foundation for providing the facilities.

This fifth meeting, under the leadership of FPRI Senior Fellow Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli, focused on the role of the press in building support for improved India-Pakistan relations. While the agenda differed from the preceding sessions, the theme remained: that India and Pakistan must find a way out of their hostility for the benefit of their own, and regional, peace and prosperity. Senior editors from influential newspapers attended and assisted in developing a set of recommendations.

The importance of these exchanges was given dramatic illustration on the final day of the meeting, when India conducted five nuclear tests. As hosts of the only senior India-Pakistan group meeting at the time, we were heartened by the resolve of the participants to preserve contacts and the dialogue. Indeed, such meetings have become even more important: subsequent events have emphasized the need for peace between India and Pakistan as both governments, the region, and the world absorb the emergence of two openly nuclear powers. Work must continue to hold open the way for a different and more harmonious relationship in the future.



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President

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**"Perceptions of Diplomacy and Ground Realities: The Role of the Press in Building
Support for Improved India - Pakistan Relations"**

**Meeting at the Bellagio Conference Center, The Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio, Italy,
May 6 - 11, 1998**

The fifth meeting¹ of senior Indian, Pakistani and U.S. participants took place with a somewhat different agenda. The meeting included senior editors from influential newspapers from the subcontinent as well as political, military and diplomatic leaders. The agenda focused on the key issues in relations between the two countries and ways that the press could assist in building better relations. A blueprint of media actions was discussed and a number of specific actions as a follow-on to the meeting were agreed upon. The timing turned out to be dramatic as the five initial Indian nuclear tests were conducted on the final day of the meeting. Thus, as perhaps the only senior India-Pakistan group meeting at the time, or since, there was a great deal of discussion on the last day and the morning of the departure on the 12th, of events leading to the tests and the likely consequences. Some of the points discussed on the agenda and the nuclear issues are incorporated in the report.

Participating in the meeting were the following:

Bharat Bhushan
General Mahmud Durrani
Shekhar Gupta
Air Chief Marshal Kaul
General Satish Nambiar
Najam Sethi
Shaharyar Khan
Shirin Tahir-Kheli

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Political Update

The discussion focused on the political developments in the subcontinent since the previous meeting a few months earlier in Muscat, Oman. Political events were said to be confused, lacking conceptual approach to building a better future between India and Pakistan. Participants recognized that rapprochement between the two countries had been slowed by events such as the launching of the "Ghauri" missile by Pakistan, events in Kashmir, and an increase in accusations from both sides of interference in internal affairs and terrorism. It was said that the group should encourage the development and pursuit of a positive framework by the respective prime ministers when they meet in Colombo in July, 1998 for a meeting of SAARC. There was an urgent need for both sides to back away from their tendency to carry to an extreme the tendency to blame each other.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was said to be committed to an improvement with India but had come to recognize that the pace of normalization would slow if there was no movement in Kashmir. The breakdown in the June 1997 Indo-Pakistan agreement at the foreign secretary level over semantics regarding "working groups" on Kashmir had set back the process launched by the respective prime ministers. It was also noted that there had been changes in the political fortunes of the leadership on each side with elections and change of relevant officials which was bound to slow progress.

The Pakistani side felt that Kashmir must be discussed in a meaningful fashion even though no one underestimated the complexity of the issue. It was said that Pakistan has already made a concession by agreeing to discuss Kashmir once again in the "bilateral" context and that the larger and stronger power, India, has to take the bigger step toward peace and friendship. The Indian side did not foresee a dramatic change in the status of Kashmir, and one participant wondered if the issue could actually continue to be classified as a "dispute" rather than a "problem." The participants felt, however, that the two prime ministers needed to elevate the dialogue to the political level and to announce the appointment of a political emissary, "men of maturity and wisdom," as it was characterized, to take charge of the discussions. Issues in India-Pakistan relations were unlikely to be sorted out at the bureaucratic level. As one participant put it, the "bureaucrats continue the same language of thirty years ago and are responsible for the semantics problem of 1997 which they themselves created."

India was thought to be a strategic factor for Pakistan because of geography and history. The existence of Pakistan was a given for the Indian leadership despite accusations to the contrary.

Bangladesh was noted as an example of a nation that begins to move forward once it comes to terms with itself and begins to operate with a sense of identity and confidence. A discussion of the problems faced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ensued. The limitations on the BJP in relations with Pakistan were noted as being more severe than those faced by the previous prime minister, I.K. Gujral, because of constraints within the party and a fear of the Islamic world. It was noted (before the Indian nuclear test) India would maintain its nuclear option in the face of the demonstrated Chinese capability and the (then) acknowledged (but not demonstrated) Pakistani one.

Participants felt that, to some extent, Indo-Pakistan relations are driven by the personal chemistry between the leaders from the two countries. Despite the disagreement on the importance of the Kashmir issue in preventing better relations, participants thought that movement in other areas — e.g., economic — could provide a future peg for anchoring a more solid relationship.

Pitfalls to be Avoided

There was consensus regarding certain issues and styles which complicate the development of better ties between India and Pakistan. Several were considered particularly note worthy. These were: avoidance of terms such as "breakthrough" or "historic" when referring to progress in talks; negative consequences of messages that "blow hot and cold" on the commitment to better relations by either side; negative language in the extreme, especially when espoused by the most senior officials; provocative statements by the leadership and the deliberate use of negative terms and references to the other side as part of a domestic agenda; propensity to address the press after each meeting and backing away from the agreements reached after strenuous questioning in the media.

Role of the Press in Conflict Resolution between India and Pakistan

There was extensive discussion of the role of the press and ways in which it influences the relationship between India and Pakistan. The following discussion draws on the presentation by the senior editors present at the meeting and the subsequent discussion.

Attempts to improve Indo-Pakistan relations are full of examples when one or the other side worked hard to build agreements in a spirit of compromise and abandoned the effort when one or the other negotiator faced harsh questioning by the media upon return to the home country.

The near agreement on disengagement in Siachin in early 1989 and the breakdown of the agreement reached by the two respective foreign secretaries in 1997 are cases in point.

The role of the press in the problems over Kashmir are particularly noteworthy. While members of the media may not have familiarized themselves with the history of the issues, they are not short of opinion and are willing to question the motives of any leader willing to make compromises in order to build a better future between the two countries. As one participant put it, "In the absence of history, you get hysteria!"

Coverage of Kashmir, which Pakistan has decided is a "core" issue and which India declares to be exclusively an "internal" matter, is a case in point. Indian journalists are likely to believe that Pakistan is conducting a "proxy" war against India in Kashmir and the media seems to put itself in the role of feeding the frenzy about Kashmir. There may be some reluctance on the part of beat correspondents to break out of what becomes "sponsored-reporting" on Kashmir for fear of being branded as insensitive to the "national interest." A direct consequence of official disapproval could be an immediate distancing from one's regular sources in the various state agencies.

In the case of militarization and arms build-up, journalists are once again dealing with a relative lack of transparency. What information about individual military capabilities of the two countries is available comes from Jane's and not from official sources such as the ministry of defense or the army. The situation is even worse when reporting on nuclear and missile issues. Except when official sources care to share the information, as we saw in the period following the respective nuclear tests of the two countries in May 1998, neither the activities of the nuclear establishment nor that of the defense research establishment are in the public domain, as indeed they seldom are in any country. In the India-Pakistan case, however, "lack of information makes sensible, non-jingoistic and non-alarmist reporting very difficult." Such is the nature of news that alarmist reports tend more often to make page one more often than balanced reports. The most frequently published of the strategic affairs correspondents tend to be the most hawkish. They play a significant role in influencing the media by setting the agenda for the leader writers and the defense correspondents.

The case of Pakistan launching the intermediate range ballistic missile, the Ghauri, is a case in point. While the Defense Minister of India gave a measured reaction saying that India had the wherewithal to deal with the threat posed by Ghauri, strategic analysts predictably took an extreme line, with the hawks amongst them arguing that time had come for India to take the

Agni missile program out of the deep-freeze, that India's strategic depth lay shattered and that "a nation lacking in confidence could not engage in confidence building measures with others."

Such extreme views tend to gain credibility because they fill the gap created by the absence of any real communication between the two countries and the absence of significant confidence-building measures aimed at security and disarmament. When there is a breakdown in government-to-government communication, the demagogic role of the commentators tends to gain unjustified legitimacy. Some state agencies may even use the press to float certain ideas to assess their acceptability or to create the necessary public pressure to put these ideas on the national agenda.

There is an asymmetry in the coverage of Kashmir in the Indian and Pakistani press respectively. Pakistan is much more focused on Kashmir and that fact is reflected in the reporting of the issue in the press and even more so in the government-controlled electronic media. The Indian press was the first to engage the nuclear establishment in India in public debate and the disarmament lobby has a significant role in the print media. Although voices in favor of peace and better relations with Pakistan got lost following the national hoopla in the aftermath of the nuclear tests, Indian participants felt that there still exists a groundswell of opinion for peace and better relations with Pakistan, as evident in the widespread acceptability of the Gujral doctrine.

The press in Pakistan reflects, and often plays upon, the rise of "political Islam, based largely in the urban, lower middle class areas, which serves to strengthen the anti-Hindu, anti-India sentiment in the country." The rise of the BJP, seen as an exclusively Hindu political party, further strengthens this tendency. Under such an approach, interference by the intelligence agency, the ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) in the foreign policy agenda of Pakistan is actually supported by most sections of the press, particular the Urdu press.

The role of the secret services in India and Pakistan is "prominent in the vernacular press. There are two reasons for this. First, the speaker of the vernacular is already indoctrinated in the process of negative and adversarial nation-building. Second, the average, low- and middle-level employee/investigator of RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) of India and ISI of Pakistan is not sufficiently educated in English. Therefore, in a way, two hostile nationalisms are in the process of communication in the vernacular press. Both are isolationists and to an extent, paranoid."

The English language press is different in the way it functions in each country. With the onset of democracy and press freedom, the English press of Pakistan can be at odds with the foreign policy establishment of the country and question some of the assumptions, including some of the policies towards India. In India, the role of the Ministry of External Affairs is paramount on issues such as Pakistan. Several retired foreign service officers do much of the writing on Pakistan and tend to set the guidelines which are accepted despite the freedom of expression.

Confidence Building Measures Between India and Pakistan Related to the Press

Discussion of practical steps for creating a more collaborative relationship between elements of the Press in both countries led to a number of specific items. These were:

- Frequent Exchanges of Journalists Between India and Pakistan, Particularly Amongst Younger Journalists to Include the Non-English Press
- Liberal Visa Granting Policy
- Liberalize Policy on Exchange of Publications and Ease of Availability
- Use of an Internet Web Site to post Articles Promoting Better Relations
- Mutual Arrangements Between Newspapers to Lift the Copyright Restrictions
- Increase in the Number of Accredited Journalists on both Sides
- Short-Term Fellowships with Financial Support for Younger Journalists from Each Side to Intern with Major Newspapers of the Other Country
- Cessation of Harassment by Security Agencies of Journalists of the Other Country
- Implementation of the SAARC Agreement on the Exchange of Journalists, Newspapers and Periodicals
- Grant Visas Without Police Reporting Requirement for Journalists
- Undertake a Joint Study to Establish a Code of Reporting on the Other Country

Indian Electronic media has gained a wide audience in Pakistan. While it is beginning to cover Pakistani issues for Pakistani audiences, it has yet to serve as a confidence building institution. There is, however, a great deal of potential for satellite-based Indian electronic media increasing understanding of Pakistan in India. Some of the specific measures to help in this direction are:

- Opening Offices in Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore and Extending the Coverage of Pakistan's Domestic Political and Cultural Landscape
- Recruitment of Young Articulate Pakistanis to Comment on Issues

- Recruitment of Talented Young Pakistanis to Produce and Direct Pakistan Oriented Serials and Programs
- Invitations to Pakistani Print and Electronic Media Journalists for Dialogues with Counterparts in India and Publicizing these Dialogues

All participants agreed that the role of the media was critical to the creation of sustained good relations between India and Pakistan. Senior editors undertook to follow up in their institutions with actions aimed at greater collaborative activity.

EPILOGUE

The Indian nuclear test site in Rajasthan is only 110 miles from the Pakistani border. The Indian nuclear tests that occurred on the last afternoon of the meeting provided for a dramatic last twenty-four hours during which there were intense conversations among the participants until their departure from Bellagio on May 12. Given the senior nature of the group (we had present the former chief of the Indian air force and the former director-general of military operations, as well as senior editors), they were in quick contact with Delhi and were in a position to offer analytical views on the tests and their likely consequences. These and the discussion with the Pakistani group are offered below.

At the outset, the group felt that a fundamental change had taken place in the subcontinent. With it came the urgent and even stronger need for a sustained effort at improved relations between India and Pakistan. Peace now was a critical issue. The participants felt that lines of communication between the two sides had to remain open, and their role in this exercise was important.

It was clear that the Indian participants approved of what they believed had been demonstrated by the nuclear test. There was little sense of the consequences to India in either the economic costs of developing a full-fledged nuclear option (whether that option to be pursued was subject to further action by the government and was not assumed to flow automatically from the tests themselves). External reaction was less of a factor, as most Indians were swept along with the euphoria of having joined the "nuclear club."

On the other hand, the Pakistani participants were generally shaken by the Indian test and the fact that the window for active cooperation for a better future may well have closed. Hereafter, they felt that the Indo-Pak equation would be considerably more complicated. Choices for Pakistan were seen as being somewhat stark. A reciprocal test would bring on international sanctions which Pakistan could ill afford. Failure to test would put the government of Nawaz Sharif under pressure from a variety of domestic sources who would press for a tit-for-tat test even if it meant economic ruin.

Indian participants did not share the pessimistic view of future relations. They argued strongly that the Indian test was China-focused and that relations with Pakistan could continue to improve. There was no attempt to deny that Indian capability was a long-standing one. No Pakistani response to the test was expected to change the decision on the tests or their follow-up,

just as the very negative Western response would not derail the Indian government in its decisions regarding the tests and future development. There was also a sense that the government of India (GOI) had not expected the sanctions issue to be a lasting one. Europeans were expected to resist U.S. pressure to deny India trade and technology, and Europe was India's largest trading area, even though the United States was the largest single country for trade with India. In making this point, Indian participants pointed to the general absence of U.S. and European reaction to previous tests by China and by France in the mid-1990s. India's current economic position was said to be sufficiently strong to enable it to sit out the period of U.S. unhappiness.

Pakistani participants were accepting of the possibility of a muted reaction from the West and the European tendency to see even U.S. sanctions as merely an opportunity for replacing U.S. companies in the bid for Indian business — e.g., Airbus looking to replace Boeing as the supplier of future aircraft purchases by India. In a sense, the Pakistanis thought that only the American reaction mattered. There was a sense that despite strong rhetoric, the U.S. was generally a distracted state where South Asia was concerned. Therefore, concerted and sustained actions by the U.S. to punish India for conducting five nuclear tests were likely to be temporary.

A good deal of discussion on the domestic consequences of nuclear testing followed. Regarding India, participants looked at the BJP government's rhetoric about the weak government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee as being unable to move forward on the nuclear issue because of his need for consensus within the coalition government. Western writers had gone on about the moderating influence of consensus politics (see, for example, Marshall Bouton in the May/June 1998 issue of *Foreign Affairs*) with the expectation that all of the nationalistic rhetoric of the BJP could be moderated by necessity. What was missed was the factor that was amply displayed by the Indian tests — i.e., the use of the nuclear tests to *create* consensus. The BJP had strengthened its domestic position by using a popular issue: the overt identification of the Indian nuclear capability. Sure, the costs were there, but the Indians expected them to be bearable by India at this time. The Indian editors pointed out that all major newspapers had endorsed the tests and congratulated the Vajpayee government. Only the *Times of India* had pointed to the economic costs of such a policy and what that meant for the future of India and its place in the world.

One Indian participant pointed out that Mr. Kalam, who was being touted as "father of the bomb," was in fact responsible for the Indian missile program rather than the nuclear weapons tests. Pakistanis wondered if the use of a Muslim was meant for Pakistani consumption and for the international media with its penchant for labeling the Pakistani nuclear capability the "Islamic bomb."

Participants discussed the Pakistani firing of the intermediate range missile, the Ghauri, and the chest-beating that had followed in Pakistan. Indians at the meeting felt that the Pakistani test had a major negative impact on the relationship as it came along with the rhetoric that was false and insulting. The Ghauri test had left an impression in India that the Nawaz Sharif government had backed away from its earlier policy of improved relations with India. That, along with a continued attempt to de-stabilize the situation in Kashmir, had weakened the position of those who saw opportunities for the same. Vajpayee had started out in a conciliatory mood; in fact, his attendance at an India-Pakistan hockey match on his first day as prime minister was to demonstrate a friendly approach, as was his first statement in parliament, where he had talked about the Indian stake and desire for a strong Pakistan. The strength of the Indian reaction to the Ghauri as a backdrop for the Indian nuclear tests was surprising, especially as it was said that China was the motivating factor for the GOI decision to move forward toward a full-fledged nuclear weapons capability.

After a great deal of discussion on the issue, participants concluded that the immediate chances for better Indo-Pakistan relations were slim. They argued that the need to keep their contacts and discussions was even greater under current conditions. It was urged that the next meeting of the Balusa group be moved up from the October/November time frame discussed during the meeting.