

# Are India-Pakistan ties set for a thaw?

Both sides working on humanitarian steps to improve relations

Elizabeth Roche  
elizabeth.r@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI

India and Pakistan are working on some humanitarian steps like the immediate release of fishermen found straying across their maritime boundaries, two people familiar with the developments have said, a move that could lead to an eventual unfreezing of ties between the neighbours.

Neither side is using the “thaw” word just yet given the current state of bilateral relations. But an agreement between the two sides to fully implement a 2003 ceasefire pact and the atmospheric at a meeting between the coast guards of the two countries—both last week—could suggest a possible movement towards an unfreezing of ties, perhaps after Pakistan’s July polls.

“These (agreement to fully implement the 2003 ceasefire and the proposal to release fishermen) are basic humanitarian steps to ensure civilians are not in harm’s way,” said Dilip Sinha, a former foreign ministry official, who has dealt with Pakistan. “These are most elementary steps and should be seen as positive for their own sake. They could lead to something bigger in the future, though when, I can’t say,” Sinha said, pointing to upcoming national polls in Pakistan and thereafter state and general elections in India.

Talks between India and Pakistan have been suspended since 2013. And attempts to get it restarted after the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government took office in May 2014 have run aground. Complicating matters have been the violations of the 2003 ceasefire pact that has taken a heavy civilian toll on both sides.

Last week, the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan agreed to “fully implement” the ceasefire pact of 2003 in “letter and spirit” to stop

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cross-border firings in Kashmir. On Sunday, however, a reminder for the need for caution in India-Pakistan matters came with a PTI report saying that two Indian Border Security Force guards were killed in firing from the Pakistani side.

Last week again, a delegation from the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency concluded “a successful visit” to India, a Pakistani statement said, adding the talks with the Indian Coast Guard “were marked by cordiality.”

These two developments were preceded by news reports citing the Pakistan Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa as saying that a peaceful resolution of India-Pakistan disputes could be found through comprehensive and meaningful dialogue.

Indian foreign minister Sushma

Swaraj at a press conference last week said “terror and talks cannot go together”—a reference to mounting terrorist incidents in Kashmir.

Smruti Pattnaik, research fellow at the New Delhi-based think tank Institute for Defence Studies, says the coming months will be crucial.

For one, there is the case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, a former Indian navy officer who Pakistan says is a spy caught while fomenting violence in its restive Baluchistan province. A Pakistani military court sentenced him to death for espionage and terrorism. And India had approached the Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ) accusing Pakistan of violating the Vienna Convention.

“The way India and Pakistan handle this at the ICJ will be a sign of how things will play out,” Pattnaik said.

**Recent developments probably signal movement towards unfreezing of ties after Pakistan’s polls**