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## A flicker of light at the end of Kartarpur Corridor

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The longstanding wish of the Indian Sikh community to be able to visit one of Sikhism's holiest sites, the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, located in Pakistan's Punjab province, was finally fulfilled on 9 November 2019. Just a few days prior to the 550th birth anniversary of Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak, the Kartarpur Corridor was inaugurated by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, in their respective countries. The enabling of Indian pilgrims to freely move across the border into Pakistan without visas appeared to be an almost unbelievable act of faith. Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who attended the inauguration in Pakistan, stated that: *"It was a good beginning, India-Pakistan relations are subject to many buts and ifs, I hope this is a good beginning to normalize our relation"*.

Indeed, the decision to open the Kartarpur corridor by India and Pakistan constitutes a surprising yet applauded decision in what otherwise have been gloomy relations thus far between the two countries. Suspicion, invective and belligerence between the two nuclear powers remain in a crescendo; the February Pulwama attack perpetrated by Pakistan-based Terrorist organization Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM), the aftermath of the attack with the Balakot airstrikes and India's recent revocation of the special status accorded to Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir (hereinafter Indian-administered J&K). In this seemingly political abyss, the opening of the corridor should be seen as a ray of light, albeit still weak, which has the potential to illuminate ongoing dark times.

This article examines the current geopolitical climate in which the inauguration took place; it begins by briefly explaining the significance of the Kartarpur Corridor in historical context, followed by an analysis of the opening against a background of current, strained Indo-Pak relations. Although this article embraces optimism as the general outlook, it recognizes the realistic and rational aspects of current tensions, including India's legitimate fears of cross-border terrorism and Pakistan's unfounded uproar vis-à-vis the nullification of Article 370. The argument put forward by this article is that irrespective of suspicious eyebrows raised at the Kartarpur initiative, it could be conceivably time to overcome the feeling of rightful indignation and déjà-vu regarding the politically-strained and historically-charged relationship between India and Pakistan. Whilst talk of peace in the region might be too sanguine, the opening of such a line of trust could – one might even say *should* - be interpreted as a prospective confidence-building measure whereby social, political and economic frontlines could be significantly improved.

### History and significance of the Kartarpur Corridor

The Darbar Sahib Gurdwara is of immense importance to the Sikh faith as the founder of the religion, Guru Nanak, spent the last remaining 18 years of his life in Kartarpur. This holy site is

located only three kilometers from the India-Pakistan border, on the Indian side of which another historically important Sikh Gurdwara, the Dera Baba Nanak, is located. Since the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the Sikh community has devotedly advocated for visa-free travel to the shrine; the injudiciously drawn Radcliffe line rendered the holy site in Pakistan almost inaccessible to the Sikhs in India. Several attempts destined to permit visa-free travel were made throughout the years, including that of former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who proposed a visa-free corridor in 1999 as part of the Delhi-Lahore bus diplomacy. In 2000, after being refurbished by Pakistan's government, the Kartarpur shrine was opened to a limited quota of Indians who held valid visas. When Imran Khan's government assumed office, the construction of the corridor was soon announced, followed by India's announcement to build its portion of the corridor, although this was not intended as a response to the proposal set forth by Pakistan.

### The opening in the context of current Indo-Pak relations

Whilst the decision to open the corridor can indeed be considered a pivotal moment in the history of Indo-Pak relations, it would be naïve to disregard the political tensions lingering behind the arrangement. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's preference to remain on the Indian side of the Radcliffe line while other notable Indian officials – including Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh – celebrated on the Pakistani side of the border, was surely a deliberate decision indicating that any rapid breakthrough in the fractured relations between India and Pakistan is unlikely to be merely dependent on the construction of this corridor and should harbor demonstrable steps by Pakistan regarding terrorists and terrorist organizations operating on its soil against India. Moreover, a recent claim made by India's External Affairs Minister during a public address, who ruled out the possibility of dialogue with Pakistan given it has *"built an industry of terror"*, further substantiates such reservations.

Diplomatic division was conspicuously displayed in the speeches delivered at the inauguration; while Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan might have wanted to appear to be offering an olive branch of peace to his Indian counterpart, he could not refrain from swirling into repetition over Pakistan's stance vis-à-vis Indian-administered J&K. Little to anyone's surprise, Khan began by stating that *"I kept telling Prime Minister Narendra Modi that if we solve the issue for Kashmir then all problems will be solved and there will be forever peace between India and Pakistan. But today, what's happening in Kashmir is more than just a territorial issue"*. This sentiment was similarly echoed by Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Qureshi who stated during an interview with the BBC: *"Improvement of relations will depend on their [Indian authorities] treatment and attitude in Indian-occupied Kashmir. The way they are going about maltreating people, abusing human rights..."* He continued by claiming that *"we were very clear from day one that the project was a goodwill gesture. Prime Minister Imran Khan, from day one, said 'One step forward towards peace, we will take two'. Unfortunately, we did not get the same response."*

After India's decision to revoke the special status granted under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcate the region into two Union territories, Pakistan,

despite having no locus standi on the matter, and while not covering itself in glory in its handling of the parts of J&K forcibly and illegally held by it for over seven decades, continues to deceitfully pretend to agitate for the people of Indian-administered J&K. This was made abundantly clear as Prime Minister Khan had fanatically vocalized the Kashmir issue at international platforms, including the recent UN General Assembly in September during which he desperately tried to exculpate Pakistan from any past or future wrongdoings vis-à-vis Jammu & Kashmir, mischievously instigated the Kashmiri youth to pick up arms and threatened the world of a nuclear war. As underlined in EFSAS Commentary, [‘Pakistan’s eminent culpability in the dilution of Article 370 relating to Jammu & Kashmir’](#), Pakistan’s forcible and illegal handling of Pakistan-administered J&K over seven decades render such clamor highly presumptuous and dubious. Imran Khan’s domestic challenges on both economic and political - such as the recently held “Freedom March”, organized by opposition parties with the intention of protesting against the current government, in addition to the desperate state of Pakistan’s economy - have undeniably also undermined Khan’s reputation within the country. Why Prime Minister Khan feels the necessity to cling onto the Kashmir matter is no coincidence.

### Fears over the Khalistan Movement

Pakistan’s official promotional video displayed on the Kartarpur Corridor - featuring Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his military adviser Shabeg Singh, dubbed the perpetrators of the reign of terror in Punjab during the 1980’s – was in rather distaste to the otherwise ceremonial character of this undertaking. Professor Balkar Singh, a Sikh scholar and the Director of the World Punjabi Centre at Punjabi University, contends that “[i]t is quite obvious that political entities in India and Pakistan, the Pakistani Army included, are all playing politics in the name of the Kartarpur corridor. The security establishment in Delhi is raising the bogey of Khalistan, and some elements in Pakistan may actually try to foment trouble in ham-handed ways”.

It is true that Indian authorities have regularly raised concerns over the possibility of Pakistan misusing the open access corridor for creating social unrest and terror. Although crushed by India’s counterinsurgency campaign more than two decades ago, suspicion has risen amongst strategic circles on whether India is miscalculating the true extent of Pakistan’s ‘goodwill’ gesture, whereby the Army of the latter could greatly benefit from the project if it wishes to re-ignite the fires of terrorism in Punjab with the aid of expatriate radical Sikhs.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the idea of Punjab suddenly inundated with Sikhs who return from Kartarpur with subversive intent is an unrealistic one, as it does not appreciate the deep repugnance to Khalistan and terrorism that have taken root in the hearts of Sikhs followed by the unrest that devastated the region throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. This view is further elucidated by Gurpreet Singh, president of the Kendri Singh Sabha, who argues: “Residual fragments of Khalistanis are not even 1% of the population now. Even at the height of militancy, only about 5% of Sikhs subscribed to the ideology. The talk of reviving the movement is just bogey drummed up by those who wish to exploit Sikh sentiments for their own politics. To even imagine

*that patriotic Sikhs will fall for the blatant propaganda being conducted by a section of the Pakistani establishment is hurtful”.*

Pakistan’s long and blemished history of state-sponsored terrorism unquestionably adds fuel to the fire, however lack of evidence directly linking this particular phenomenon to the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor and the fact that Sikhs are no longer gullible to terrorist and Khalistani propaganda, as explained above, the possible revival of Khalistan separatism should, for the time being, most certainly be watched, but not weaken the merits of the debate. Both Islamabad and New Delhi would do well to, while being realistic, also acknowledge the corridor as a considerable achievement.

### [A flicker of hope?](#)

The opening of the corridor has been met with mixed reviews; whereas some have compared the attempt to a budget Z movie production – low budget, terrible screen-play and a predictable box office disaster – others have detected the full potential of the script, asserting that the final outcome may not be as predictable as it seems. However, in the largely turbulent political climate, the possible social, political and economic achievements of the landmark initiative deserve appreciation. In an environment where virtually every avenue of people-to-people contact has been closed for decades, the opening of the corridor should be seen as a great sign of cooperation between South Asia’s nuclear-armed rivals, packed with possible prospects for peace.

From a socio-political standpoint, New Delhi and Islamabad should recognize and therefore embrace the possibility of reducing the current trust deficit in both nations; this could be achieved by promoting people-to-people contact and bolstering religious tourism across the borders, not only for religious minorities, but for Muslim and Hindu majorities. Sharda Peeth, a Hindu temple located in Pakistan-administered J&K, is another example of a religious site which could potentially be opened in accordance with the Kartarpur corridor model. Demands for opening up access to similar religious sites should not fall on deaf ears; in fact, such steps could receive positive attention in the sphere of international geopolitics. As diplomatic ties are rock bottom between India and Pakistan, great powers such as the United States (US) have demonstrated a considerable interest in the Kartarpur project. The US State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus dubbed the Kartarpur project as *“impressive” and an important step towards “Promoting greater religious freedom”*, adding that *“... this project will transform a move, three-acre site across a sensitive international boundary. Congratulations to India and Pakistan on this initiative”*. Interest on behalf of the US can further be explained by the significant number of Sikhs holding US citizenship who have actively lobbied for the corridor. From a geopolitical standpoint, both Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Khan should recognize the possibility of adding a new layer to their diaspora diplomacy beyond India and Pakistan; transcending the Kartarpur as an exception could help facilitate the long-overdue collective reflection on what unites the countries in the Subcontinent.

Based on this, optimism around the Kartarpur opening should increase the appetite for other such initiatives. Although the completion of the corridor has undoubtedly been a challenge, replete

with substantial disagreements regarding technical and logistical issues, its opening should be interpreted as a confidence-building measure in what until now has been a politically-strained relationship between the two countries. Because ultimately, if one peels off the geopolitical bluster, increasing nuclear threats, and the enduring trauma ascribable to the 1947 Partition, the commonalities of the two countries become increasingly evident and unavoidable. Nurturing and fostering the divide between India and Pakistan might have suited politics, however, underneath such attempts of casting prejudice against one another, Indian and Pakistani societies may share much more in common than politicians would dare to admit. Just 70 years ago, both India and Pakistan were one. They continue to share the same language, the same culture, and the same civilization. By setting big power politics aside, Indian and Pakistani politicians could collaborate with the objective of promoting mutual trust between their people.

### Conclusion

While rapprochement may be too strong a word, the Kartarpur Corridor initiative may definitely point to an opportunity of initiating the easing of tensions between the two hostile South Asian neighbors. As much as the corridor has the potential to enhance a channel of trust, it simultaneously widens the channel of responsibility. Notwithstanding New Delhi's legitimate fears vis-à-vis the dubious motives possessed by Pakistan's Military Establishment and its sine qua non in thwarting any bid of regional harmony, the agreement to construct the Kartarpur corridor in deference to the long-pending demand of Sikh pilgrims is laudable.

As national security concerns continue to dominate the discussion among policy elites in both India and Pakistan, it is clear that Kartarpur is not the magical solution to resolve all deeply controversial issues between the hostile neighbors; Islamabad must give up its use of terror and sponsoring thereof as an instrument of State policy. Moreover, trust between the main political actors - as well as sharing common values and objectives - must be achieved before the institutionalization of the process of building peace.

Regardless, the initiative demonstrates the ability of India and Pakistan to put their differences aside in order to serve the broader interests of the nation-states. Even the pessimist must confess that this is a praiseworthy achievement for the two South Asian nations.



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