

DailyTimes | Expand cross-LoC interaction

During the last decade, substantial ground was covered on improving bilateral ties as part of the cross-LoC interaction between the two parts of Jammu Kashmir



- SHEIKHUPURA

Both India and Pakistan seem to be caught in a dialogue trap. With numerous composite dialogues since the 1990s, both countries are engaged in what appears to be a cyclic pattern, rather than a unilinear upward trajectory. Given the current trend, terrorism and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) figure as two crucial issues in Indo-Pak dialogue, but Afghanistan and Indus Water Treaty may also get added to this list.

In this context, are there any “big ticket items” that could change the current cyclic pattern of composite dialogue? Also, are there any low-hanging fruits? The following commentary looks at resumption of cross-Line of Control (LoC) interaction as a low hanging J&K fruit.

None would deny the importance of J&K to the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, and also to the composite dialogue between the two states. During the last decade, substantial ground was covered on the issue as cross-LoC interaction between two parts of J&K had expanded. The start of bus and truck services across the LoC was undoubtedly the most revolutionary measure undertaken by India and Pakistan pertaining to the J&K issue, since the partition. This movement in cross-LoC interaction was further enhanced because of support from a majority of the people in J&K. These State initiatives and public support for them in the J&K combined to trigger a sense of euphoria, about the possibility of

sustaining cordial Indo-Pak ties, both regionally and internationally.

The time has come to let everyone permanently residing in the J&K region to use the bus service for freedom of movement

Unfortunately, both India and Pakistan failed to make good use of the bus and truck services. They could not proceed to other confidence building measures that may have led to a better political environment in (and on) J&K and facilitated a larger dialogue on a final settlement. While people living on all parts of J&K across the LoC were initially euphoric about such a possibility, pessimism slowly started settling in.

Perhaps, India and Pakistan did not realise the importance of cross-LoC interactions in the larger J&K debate; or perhaps, inward-looking sections in both countries understood the possible impact of such interactions and worked to slow down these interactions.

Cross-LoC interaction is certainly a low hanging fruit in J&K. Both India and Pakistan could still revise their approach, expand interactions further in certain sectors and deepen activities in sectors where a beginning has already been made. Since there is substantial support for revival of interaction in all five parts of J&K across the LoC, these would be all inclusive and cut across different segments — political, business and civil society.

Cross-LoC interaction is not only a low-hanging fruit but it also has the potential to become a “big ticket item” in India and Pakistan ties.

The problems are well known but so are the solutions. The bus and truck services need to be upgraded. So far, the bus service between two parts of J&K has primarily been serving the regions of Jammu, Kashmir Valley, Muzaffarabad and Mirpur. There are divided families outside of these regions as well. It is about time that the bus service is expanded to cover areas like Kargil, Leh, Skardu, Gilgit. This will allow members of families divided between these areas to meet one another.

Additionally, time has come to let everyone permanently residing in the J&K region to use the bus service for cross-LoC movement. In certain cases, entire families have moved from one part to the other and members of such families cannot get travel permission on the existing criteria any longer.

Cross-LoC trade also needs to be revised and supported with development of basic infrastructure. At a time when companies like Amazon are revolutionising trade at the international level with e-commerce and use of drone technology to deliver goods, India and Pakistan cannot continue to stick to a medieval barter system of trade. As it is being practiced now, cross-LoC trade is a cruel joke on the business community. Without basic banking and telecommunication facilities, it is impractical and even foolish on part of the two countries to expect business to make any impact in the 21st century. India and Pakistan should not misguide business communities.

In the cross-LoC trade context, the business community also has to understand certain limitations relating to the list of items and the destination of trucks. Businesses across the LoC see trade as an intra-Kashmiri affair and, thus, expect to benefit from a movement of goods between the two parts of J&K. Given the nature of LoC, there is bound to be restrictions on the list of items to be traded and destinations allowed. The business community will have to work with the State and consider innovative measures to make cross-LoC trade productive and meaningful, even with these restrictions in place.

The business community will also have to understand that there would be elements trying to maximise profits and make use of cross-LoC provisions. Proxy trade and trade diversion are bound to happen, as has been the case with any trade with special provisions. More importantly, the business community should look at trade as an economic activity and desist from making it political. It should let the political interaction between two parts of J&K be led by other actors.

The NGOs and think tanks also have a role to play. They can provide creative solutions to make cross-LoC interactions meaningful. Already, proposals have been put forth for the purpose and for track-II dialogue involving both parts of J&K. If New Delhi and Islamabad cannot facilitate and support this dialogue, they can at least help by allowing this dialogue to take place.

Studies have also been published on ways to expand cross-LoC interactions in education and tourism sectors.

Cross-LoC interactions between two parts of J&K have been limited so far, though the potential of these interactions for a larger Indo-Pak peace process is unlimited.

A series of commentaries are planned for this column during the next few weeks to try and find “Big Ticket Items” and “Low Hanging Fruits” in the Indo-Pak context.

The author is a Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) Bangalore. He edits annual titled Armed Conflicts in South Asia and runs a portal on Pakistan —

www.pakistanreader.org