



Expanding Cross-LoC Interactions Perspectives from India

D. Suba Chandran

Deputy Director, IPCS, New Delhi

While there are numerous criticisms of the nature and content of the cross-LoC interactions initiated so far, not many in J&K, on either side of the LoC, dispute their usefulness or the need to expand this process. India and Pakistan, despite the breakdown in their dialogue after the Mumbai attacks in October 2008, have continued with this interaction. However, there is much more that needs to and can be done without either country compromising its stated position. What are the major issues involved in cross-LoC CBMs? While numerous recommendations have been made in the past, can these be prioritized? Which issues need to be addressed immediately? How can the existing CBMs be improved and made more productive?

I CROSS-LOC INTERACTIONS: MAJOR ISSUES/ PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS

It is imperative that both India and Pakistan understand certain issues and questions before expanding these interactions, which will be extremely beneficial to both countries. Given the fact that neither India nor Pakistan is likely to reach a major agreement on uniting all parts of J&K and evolve a composite package, it will be prudent to expand these interactions. Both countries need to address the following questions/issues, based primarily, on the popular expectations at the local

level within J&K.

Cross-LoC Interactions: Are All Sub-regions of J&K Covered?

The process of interaction began, as mentioned above, in 2005, with the historic initiation of the bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. Later, another service was started between Poonch and Rawlakote. Both these services address the needs and aspirations of the people living both, in the Kashmir Valley and Jammu region, primarily in the twin districts of Rajouri and Poonch.

The primary objective of the bus services is to cater to the divided families living along the Line of Control. However, the Line of Control does not end in the Kupwara district of Kashmir Valley; neither do divided families live in the above districts alone. The LoC extends further and goes right up to NJ9842 in Ladakh, thereby including the Leh and Kargil districts of an important and perhaps the largest sub-region of J&K. There are numerous divided families in the Kargil and Skardu region as well.

Even outside the Kargil district, divided families are spread out all across Ladakh. For example, even today, there are families in Leh town with family connections on the other side. The family and business linkages of several families trading along the famous Silk Route in the southern sector, extend up to Gilgit and even Kashgar in the north and to Yarkand in the east. Tutuk region in particular, has divided families of recent origin, as it was captured by India during the 1971 war. In Jammu region also, there are numerous divided families outside the twin districts of Rajouri and Poonch; for example, in the present-day Nowshera tehsil, there are numerous families with familial links in Mirpur. Even today, there is a direct road from Mirpur and Nowshera, which was opened shortly after the earthquake in 2005.

Also, the linkages between the Jammu and Sialkot districts are being deliberately ignored. From Jammu city to Sialkot – with a distance of hardly 40kms between the two – including RS Pora and Suchetgarh, there are numerous families that have been divided. The political response that the Sialkot and Jammu road does not fall under the LoC (for it is across the IB)



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is unacceptable, as there are other openings along the IB in Punjab (Indian and Pakistani) and Rajashtan-Sindh regions.

Unfortunately, despite repeated requests, the nature of cross-LoC interactions seems to be primarily restricted to a few districts in Kashmir Valley and Rajouri and Poonch. There is a need to enlarge this focus, in terms of regions that are interacting across the LoC.

Cross-LoC Interactions: Are all Sub-Communities/ Groups of J&K covered?

Besides the regional differences, there are also imbalances in terms of the communities that are interacting across the LoC. According to the current understanding between the two governments, only those who have divided families across the LoC are permitted to cross it using the two bus services; people are required to prove to the authorities that they have families on the other side. In most cases, only the Muslim community in the Kashmir Valley and the twin districts of Rajouri and Poonch have divided families across the LoC.

Historically, after the 1947 War, Hindu and Sikh communities migrated to the Indian side of J&K, leaving behind their ancestral homes, now under Pakistan's administration. This community, now settled all over the Jammu region, is extremely anxious to visit the other side. Unfortunately, since its members do not have divided families on the other side, they have not been permitted to use either of the two existing bus services, meant only for divided families. While divided families of the Muslim community have been able to visit each other and make use of the bus services, those from the Hindu and Sikh communities, who were also displaced post-1947, have been denied this opportunity. It is only fair therefore, that these two communities be made part of the cross-LoC interactions. Second, people of Ladakh, Kargil, Skardu, and Gilgit, have a Bolti identity and believe that while the divided families of the Kashmiri and Pahri Muslims have been given an opportunity to meet each other, the Bolti, especially the Shia Muslims of the Kargil-Skardu regions have been denied this opportunity.

Cross-LoC Trade: Trickle, but is it Effective?

After starting the two bus services, India and Pakistan made another bold move in October 2008 by opening up the LoC for the movement of trucks along the same routes on which the buses ply. While

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initially it was agreed to allow for a fortnightly movement of trucks, just a few months into the inauguration of the trade, it was revised and made a weekly phenomenon.

Historically, the main outlet for the movement of goods from Kashmir Valley has been through the all-weather Srinagar-Uri-Muzaffarabad-Rawalpindi road, along the Jhelum road. This traditional, historical movement was interrupted after 1947, forcing the movement of goods into and outside Kashmir Valley, through the Banihal pass/Jawahar tunnel alone, which has been subject to landslides, snow, and heavy traffic.

Though the business community is happy about the opening up of the LoC for the movement of goods, there are significant irritants that persist. Contrary to popular expectations, the trading basket and quantity of goods, remain small. Besides, the trade is primarily directed to Kashmir and not through Kashmir; the popular expectation, especially in the Valley had been that opening the LoC for trade would allow businessmen to trade in all kinds of goods—from carpets to apples, all the way up to the Gulf countries via Karachi.

Additionally, there is also a regional divide within J&K, in terms of Jammu and Kashmir Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Currently, the Chambers and the Governments on both sides of the LoC have not reached any understanding on the mode of payment/currency. While the Chambers in Jammu-Poonch-Rawlakot-Mirpur have no problem in dealing with any currency, members of the KCCI do not wish to trade in any other international currency, for that would mean a recognition of the LoC as an international border. Given the political problems involved in the choice of currency and the lack of common banking systems on both sides of the LoC, the cross-LoC trade unfortunately, will continue to be based on the barter system and may not live up to its full potential.

Businessmen belonging to the Jammu and Kashmir regions also complain that the cross-LoC trade is being hijacked by traders who do not belong to the state. Due to concessions, the locals believe that the bilateral Indo-Pak trade across the Wagah border is now being routed through Kashmir, thus, not benefiting the state. Finally, both India and Pakistan consider the LoC trade as a political and not an economic CBM. This is in contrast to the perceptions of the people and business communities on either side of the LoC who consider this an economic CBM that will impact their livelihoods for the better. Given the basic differences in approach, and the Indo-Pak and wider SAARC trading experiences, one can expect the cross-LoC trade project to lose steam, unless both countries take effective measures.

Is the Travel and Communication Regime Easy?

While new avenues/routes need to be explored, problems relating to the existing travel regime that allows the movement of divided families and businessmen, also need to be addressed. Though divided families travel using local documents (and

not passports), the movement is not easy—it is cumbersome, time consuming, and at times, even arbitrary.

Traders and businessmen prefer a system that would allow for multiple-visa entries, and even permit them to travel in their own vehicles. India is yet to allow people from its part to even have direct telephone connections.

II RECOMMENDATIONS

The governments of India and Pakistan and those of Srinagar/Muzaffarabad/Gilgit could pursue the following to make the cross-LoC interactions even more meaningful. While numerous recommendations have been made on the possible interactions between both sides of the LoC; the following make a case, in particular, for interactions at the popular level.

Cross-LoC Tourism

Given the above limitations on cross-LoC trade, and that the movement of people is not inclusive, there is a need to look beyond to improve the cross-LoC interactions. In this regard, tourism is an area with enormous potential whose legal and political aspects can be underplayed.

Today, the two bus services across Uri and Poonch, carry divided families on a regular basis, without much compromise on legal and political issues related to travel. In promoting tourism for un-divided families belonging to the state, the same arrangement can be pursued in facilitating travel. If both countries have certain security concerns, India and Pakistan could begin by allowing circuit tourism by identifying select places and specific dates, as was done by the Chinese in Tibet. To be even more specific, as a pilot initiative, both countries could start with pilgrimage tourism and later expand to other forms.

Both in Kashmir Valley and Rajouri and Poonch districts, for example, there are numerous shrines of Sufi saints, who are revered by everyone, across regional and religious divides. For example, Shahdra Sahrief near Rajouri is an important shrine, where Baba Ghulam Shah is worshiped by the Muslims, Hindus and even Sikhs from all over the region. Along with Sai Miran, Nagali Saheb and Buddha Amarnath, this could become an effective religious circuit.

Economically, cross-LoC tourism will benefit all the regions. From Poonch to Gilgit, there are numerous places of importance from the point of view of historical, adventure and religious tourism that are certain to attract people from all parts of Kashmir. Places of worship belonging to Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist communities are spread all across J&K and not limited to one region alone. Buddhists from Ladakh for instance, would love to go up to even Swat and beyond; a Pandit would like to visit the Sharada Peeth in Kishan Ganga Valley; and a Muslim, the Hazratbal and Shahdra Sharief. Because of their historical significance, Gulmarg, Dal

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Lake, Ladakh, and Jammu would enthrall people from across the LoC, just as Gilgit, Skardu and Mirpur would attract people from J&K. Historically, there are numerous places, from the ancient era until today that would attract people on either side to visit the other.

As part of the cross-LoC tourism pilot project, both countries could consider promoting adventure tourism, primarily to attract foreigners in the initial stages and then expand the project's ambit further to include the locals as well. There used to be a huge tourist inflow into Gilgit and Leh regions from Europe, which has reduced considerably, owing to the global economic slowdown. A joint effort to woo international tourists, by providing access to both regions, may help these regions mobilize and increase tourism, which will be an economic boon for both.

Such measures to develop religious, adventure and historical tourism are likely to give a tremendous fillip to economic activities on either side. From building small *dhabas* to constructing huge hotels, the economic benefit of cross-LoC tourism will have its own dynamics vis-à-vis political issues.

Obviously, there are security implications of such a movement. Hence, to start with, India could consider the Chinese model of allowing tourism in Tibet, whereby it had encouraged group tourism in the beginning instead of promoting individual tourists. India and Pakistan can also adopt such a strategy as a starting point: group tourism for religious, historical and adventure purposes. Once the confidence level increases, both countries could relax the restrictions further and open it up to everyone. Once this process is set in motion, both countries could even think about attracting international tourists with a joint package. Imagine a trip from Europe or US to New Delhi-Srinagar/Leh-Kargil-Skardu-Gilgit-Islamabad and back!

Open Jammu-Sialkot and Kargil-Skardu Routes

Since 2005, two routes have been opened for the movement of people and goods. Since there are popular expectations from other regions of J&K as well, both countries could consider opening the Jammu-Sialkot and Kargil-Skardu routes as well, for the movement of both people and goods.

The road between Jammu and Sialkot which has fallen into disuse, is not totally unusable. With

minimum inputs, both countries could easily open up the road, and follow it up with rail links. If there is a Samjhauta Express between New Delhi and Lahore, there should not be any fear within either country against restarting the rail connection, which had existed until 1947. In fact, during the British period, the main train link between Jammu and New Delhi went through Sialkot and Lahore! Both countries could consider starting a Tawi or Chenab Express!

Besides the Jammu-Sialkot axis, both countries should consider opening the Kargil-Skardu road. This, in fact, should be done immediately, given that the other regions – Jammu and Kashmir valley, have at least one axis each to cross the LoC. While the Indian side seems to have lesser problems in opening up this axis, Pakistan appears more apprehensive. Given the fact that Islamabad recently provided an autonomy package to the Northern Areas, and more importantly, New Delhi seems to have given up any claim over this region (with the exception of some periodic rhetoric), Pakistan should not be afraid of opening this route for fear that it might affect its hold over Gilgit and Baltistan.

Reviving the Heritage Routes

India and Pakistan should also consider opening certain heritage roads that go through J&K – in particular, two roads – the Mughal Road and Silk Road. Both have an enormous historical and heritage value, which will be a great political CBM, not only between India and Pakistan, but also India, Pakistan and both sides of J&K.

The Mughal Road is perhaps six hundred years old, used primarily from the time of Akbar until Shah Jahan's reign. The Mughal caravans used to travel from Agra to Srinagar via New Delhi, Lahore, Mirpur, Rajouri and Soprian, cutting through the mighty Pir Panjal. They have built numerous forts and sarais on the way, many of which exist even today. The Silk Road is much older; caravans from China to Europe travelled up and down for centuries carrying numerous goods; Lhasa-Leh-Gilgit-Kashgar, and Yarkand-Leh-Gilgit routes are a part of this historical silk road, perhaps the oldest, longest and grandest in the history of world. Opening these two roads will be a great economic, sociological and political CBM between the countries, including China and the people of the region. With China already completing the east-west Gas pipelines between Shanghai and Central Asia, both India and Pakistan could jointly consider tapping this potential. Perhaps, in the next two decades, the Chinese will convert what was once the Silk Road into a Gas Route!

Allow Regional Festivals and Border Melas

Both India and Pakistan should consider granting permission for the organization of regional festivals and border *melas* along the LoC. Unfortunately, both India and Pakistan have had a defensive approach to their peripheral regions; India, more due to its huge geographical spread, and Pakistan, due to its own governance problems. As a result, border regions such as Poonch, Rajouri, Gurez, Skardu, and Astore have become even more isolated – culturally

and geographically.

Regional festivals and border *melas* could be organized on cultural grounds, to provide an opportunity to people living along both sides of the LoC to come together and take part in various secular events for three to five days. Despite the differences and hardening of attitudes, there is an element of understanding with respect to organizing a similar *mela* along the international border for Baba Chamliyal, who while buried on the Indian side, has a huge following on both sides. Though there is no major agreement between the two countries, there is an understanding at the ground level between the para military forces—Pakistani rangers bring flowers and gifts, while the BSF give them 'Shakkar' (clay) 'Sharbat' (water) from the shrine. Both countries can organize similar cultural and religious festivals all along the LoC. This region is full of Sufis and their shrines, for example Shahdra Sharief, Sai Miran and Chotta Mian in Rajouri, Poonch and Mendhar respectively. Traditionally, these regions have also had exclusive cultural festivals with peculiar events, for example, the Poonch festival has wrestling and "stone lifting" event, which is unique and would attract even international attention.

Make Cross-LoC Trade an Economic CBM

As mentioned earlier, cross-LoC trade is seen as a political CBM by both governments. It should be pursued as an economic CBM, benefiting local business communities and people on both sides of the LoC. While an element of external involvement, in terms of traders from other regions getting benefited cannot be totally overruled, both governments could make an effort to minimize it. For the trading to pick up, there is a need to expand the basket of goods and the quantity exchanged. More importantly, there should be adequate banking facilities, without which trade will not prosper. The current trade is taking place through a barter system, based on trust and enthusiasm. In the long run however neither of these will help. Trade should be conducted as trade and an economic activity.

Ease the Travel and Communication Regime

The travel and communication regime for both the divided families and traders should be made simpler. India should immediately restore communication linkages and allow people on its side of J&K to call the other side directly.

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