



Strategic Compulsions and Failure of CBMs in South Asia

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Introduction

Regional strategic dynamics in South Asia are both intricate and manifold. On the political spectrum partition of subcontinent resolved the communal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. But the new geopolitical predicaments arose largely due to hasty nature of British withdrawal that left behind a number of unresolved issues and disputes. This resulted in an “enduring rivalry”¹ between India and Pakistan that has entered into its 67th year now. Regional security environment and strategic competition further complicated the historical pattern of prolonged conflict, which subsequently has fostered an environment of mutual suspicions and misunderstandings that spark crises and at times escalate to full-fledged wars. South Asia has been nuclearized in the course of protracted rivalry, while efforts for building confidence and mutual trust have not been successful.

Even after the overt nuclearization in 1998, mutual distrust has not receded, rather it has further deepened. Before introduction of nuclear weapons in the sub-continent, mutual suspicion and distrust led to wars, but after 1974, crises and localized skirmishes became the norm. Today India and Pakistan are mired in a state of cold peace i.e. direct hostilities are absent but there is very little trade, travel and diplomatic interaction. There exists mutual hostility leading to lack of mutually beneficial interactions aimed at developing trust, interdependence, and collaboration.

To manage the conflict, resolve crises and create conditions that could lead to resolution of disputes between them, India and Pakistan have held various rounds of dialogue, involving negotiations, often at times summit level. These interactions have produced series of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in both military and non-military fields. However, CBMs and various other attempts at engaging the political leaders and negotiators from both sides, have failed to manage the conflict and stop emergence of new crises. Most importantly, conditions necessary for resolution of disputes could not be generated and an environment for conflict transformation has not been produced by CBMs.

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Despite the fact that over the last four decades, there have been numerous attempts at building confidence and establishing a degree of trust between the arch rivals, but despite these attempts crises have erupted, tensions have been escalated by limited exchange of fire and shelling across the Line of Control (LoC) and the Working Boundary. Dialogue process as a result often came to a halt.

This begs the question, why have CBMs failed to make meaningful progress or in other words, why have CBMs not been a catalyst of change that they were supposed to be? Before addressing the why question, we need to briefly look at what is the strategic environment of South Asia in which CBMs are being instituted. To understand why CBMs have failed to create conditions for transformation of conflict, it is imperative to view underlying dynamics associated with protracted rivalry through the broader lens of regional geo-political competition and security.

India's strategic apprehensions

India is a bigger military power in both men and material capabilities as compared to Pakistan. It's a rising economic market with over one billion population. It has seven times bigger landmass than Pakistan. It hopes to compete against China for attaining a global power status. Hence, naturally China factor becomes a part of the South Asian security calculus.

India is also suspicious of Chinese strategic objectives in the region. It believes China is encircling it by expanding its relations with India's smaller neighbors. India is particularly alarmed by the special relationship between China and Pakistan, which India believes has the singular purpose of keeping New Delhi entangled in the region. From Indian perspective, military cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing presents it the nightmarish scenario of fighting a two-front war that would slow down its rise as a global power.

More puzzling perceptions have been raised by the Chinese pursuit of the so-called "string of pearls"² in the Indian Ocean region. To put it in a context, Makran coastline of Pakistan has strategic value. It enables Pakistan to counter power projection by India in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan is steadily moving towards modernizing its air and naval power projection capabilities. Construction and operationalization of commercial port of Gwadar along this coast, with active

Chinese cooperation, has compounded Indian concerns, and provided Pakistan with wider strategic latitude. For China, this port is a crucial node in the network of ports for accessing energy pipelines that would connect Beijing with trading routes for accessing markets and energy reservoirs of Central Asia with less vulnerability.³

This development is critical for India, as its geographical outreach is restricted in the east and to the west because of presence of Bangladesh and Pakistan, while Himalayas are in the north. China has constructed a commercial port at Chittagong in the Bay of Bengal thus hindering Indian forays into the east. Indian access to South West Asia and Central Asia has been geographically constrained by its protracted rivalry with Pakistan.⁴ Similarly, presence of Bangladesh and Myanmar limit unhindered access to East Asia. Thus Chinese entry into the waters of Indian Ocean along the Makran Coast has further exacerbated the situation for India. In turn, this has forced India to rely on its expanding naval capabilities to retain access to trading routes and logistics between its continental waters and the world beyond them to fulfill its strategic shortcomings.

In its bid to modernize its naval capabilities and project power, India has inducted nuclear powered submarines, and an aircraft carrier among various other naval assets. These have the capacity to provide extended security to protect various trading routes, while completing the nuclear triad capability along with its ground based and air assets. This growing Indian presence in the Indian Ocean region along with its strategic rise has perturbed smaller neighbors of India, who fear Indian hegemony in South Asia. This strategic anxiety of smaller nations has forced them to seek external association in order to balance against the growing Indian power.

Moreover, India believes that China is providing Pakistan with assistance to boost its conventional and unconventional military capabilities in those areas where Western technologies are not meeting Pakistani needs. Specifically, New Delhi believes US involvement in Afghanistan has put Pakistan in a unique position to boost its strategic capabilities for acquisition of advanced air assets from the US and Western nations and extracting political rewards by capitalizing on its regional position (acceptance of Pakistan's role in Afghan end game etc.).⁵

In spite of these apprehensions, India's strategic edge over Pakistan in terms of structural and conventional advantages has been balanced to a large extent since Pakistan tested its nuclear deterrent in 1998. Since then, Indian policy makers have come to believe that this nuclear equalizer has emboldened Pakistan to engage in asymmetric warfare against India without fear of large-scale conventional retaliation. In turn, Indian military has put forward doctrine of "Cold Start", which envisages conducting punitive military strikes and developing a capability to engage Pakistan at lower spectrum of violence without crossing Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold. This doctrine provides India space for fighting limited wars in a nuclear environment against Pakistan, as large part of its force deployments has always remained Pakistan specific.

Enunciation of Cold Start doctrine shows Indian conviction that as long as Pakistan has the ability to keep India locked inward through asymmetric operations (as well as by relying on its relations with US and China) it will have the power to deny India a smooth rise to the status of a global power. At the same time, India believes the regional security architecture and political order should revolve around New Delhi and its ambitions. India aims to be a great power with the capability to project power beyond the region. Its ambition to attain a great power status can only be achieved if it is able to maintain status quo in South Asia.

Pakistan's strategic concerns

On the other hand, Pakistan's regional strategic apprehensions are an anti-thesis of Indian concerns and objectives. Pakistan has three direct objectives: a) ensure national survival and security b) maintain its significant position in the region owing to its geography and c) not be relegated by rising India.

Pakistan is a middle power with half a million conventional military and relies heavily on its nuclear weapons to ensure security. It has vast human resources with a population of 180 million and abundant natural resources, but currently its economy is not growing at a pace that can help to address its human resource development and other issues. It is a significant actor in the Muslim world, and this role connects Pakistan with over 57 Muslim nations and also makes Pakistan a bridge connecting China and US with the Islamic world. Despite these potentials, prevailing rivalry and intense strategic competition with India spread

over last seven decades has forced Pakistan to see the world through an India-centric prism on variety of issues.

As India strives to break out of the geographical barriers limiting its ground access to both east and west, Pakistan considers these Indian strategic moves as an attempt to encircle it geopolitically. Historically, India has tried to project its presence and increased influence in Afghanistan, which has irked Pakistan. In recent years, India increased its consulates across Afghanistan and is broadening its relations with Kabul by providing military training, equipment and by engaging in economic development programs.⁶ India has also leased a crucial airbase in Tajikistan to project its influence across Central Asia.⁷ Pakistan considers these Indian forays into Afghanistan and Central Asia as hostile to its legitimate interests. Moreover, India has also invested in construction of Chahbahar port in Iran, only 50 miles west of Gwadar port. Recently, roads connecting Chahbahar port to Afghanistan via Zahedan have also been constructed with Indian assistance.⁸ These moves have exacerbated strategic anxieties of several regional countries.

In recent years Pakistan has deployed a large portion of its forces along the western border to check cross border terrorists movement from Afghanistan, which has disturbed the strategic balance on its eastern boundaries. Though India publically proclaims China to be its principal adversary, but bulk of Indian army is deployed along Pakistan's borders and disputed Kashmir region. Since 1948, Indian and Pakistani militaries are facing each other in a tense environment along the LoC in Kashmir.

In the last decade Pakistan's strategic apprehensions have been compounded due to internal turmoil that is apparent in the form of insurgencies and spreading militancy across the country. Thus, Pakistan is locked in a catch-22 situation, i.e. it is attempting to balance against India and struggling to defeat multiple internal insurrections, while protecting its legitimate interests in Afghanistan

Geo-politically, Pakistan's worst nightmare is to be locked between two hostile neighbors i.e. India to the east and Afghanistan to the west. Pakistan's interests are better served if an ethnically diverse and Pakistan friendly government is in place in Kabul (that is a government which doesn't indulge in destabilizing Pakistan's western frontiers on behest of other powers). In contrast, if India

succeeds in making Afghanistan its satellite state, then in addition to dispute of Kashmir, a permanent state of tension leading to occasional escalation will remain a cause of instability between three countries i.e. Afghanistan, India and Pakistan.

Alongside these regional challenges, Pakistan fears that its once close ally i.e. the US will ultimately turn against it under growing Indian influence. Indo-US nuclear deal was one such development which compounded Pakistan's concerns, as Islamabad saw it as an attempt to increase the imbalance in favor of India. Moreover, US has sought to project India as a counter weight to China in the Indian Ocean region. This prioritization of US has increased geo-political utility of India, and marginalized Pakistan.

These strategic trends put pressure on Pakistan as it seeks strategic space and time to overcome multitude of internal challenges and maintain relative power equilibrium against India. The current *status quo* is inimical to Pakistan's security interests. Pakistan seeks peaceful co-existence and stability but insists it will not accept hegemony of another power in the region.

An impasse

Given the strategic concerns of India and Pakistan, both countries are locked in a logjam, due to varying goals of the two countries i.e. one is aspiring to be a global power and other wishes to be an active regional player. These strategic concerns have produced a security culture which prioritizes military competition (both conventional and unconventional) over strategic restraint and conflict resolution. It is in this geo-political environment and military climate that a path of dialogue and CBMs has some time been pursued.

CBMs in South Asia

India and Pakistan have concluded a number of CBMs on diverse issues to manage crises and conflict. These CBMs were meant for confidence building between the two states, which could transform the dynamics of relationship leading to resolution of outstanding disputes. But CBMs have failed to fundamentally transform the environment and dialogue process as held from time to time, as they have not led to conflict resolution.

The failure of CBMs and peace process to create conditions conducive for settlement of disputes and conflict resolution is due to a variety of reasons.

Conflicting political objectives

This asymmetry of power and mismatch of strategic goals translate into conflicting expectations from the CBMs and the peace process. Historically, both nations have had divergent expectation from CBMs. India has always pursued maintenance of *status quo* and advancement of CBMs that relate to economic normalization, enhancing trade and expanding people to people contact. While, Pakistan has, historically, insisted on meaningful progress towards settlement of Jammu and Kashmir dispute before normalization of relations and wider bilateral cooperation. Pakistan has held that “Kashmir is the core issue”, while in recent years, India has made dialogue conditional to progress on terrorism related issues.

Divergent perspectives of Pakistan and India were best manifested during the negotiations and their aftermath in 2001 at Agra. Negotiations over the text of draft agreement broke down due to irreconcilable positions taken by both countries. President Musharraf had traveled to Agra in 2001, which was a watershed moment in the history of bilateral relations between the two countries. There was hope that negotiation would produce a conclusive agreement. But differences over certain words in the draft of the agreement caused a breakdown of the talks. India insisted on terrorism being a core issue, while Pakistan linked normalization of relations with progress towards settlement of Jammu and Kashmir dispute which was the core issue of the conflict.⁹

Role of external actors

International community and major powers have, over the years, called on both countries to resolve outstanding issues through dialogue. During crises and wars, major powers have directly intervened to diffuse tense situations and prevent them from escalation. Two external actors, China and the United States, have high stakes in indo-Pak relations. For China, a protracted conflict on the subcontinent means, India will remain locked in the regional quagmire thus inhibiting its rise as a global actor. It simultaneously limits Indian ability to project power along the

contentious Indo-China frontier, thus relieving China of the pressure from India. However, China has always called on both countries to resolve outstanding disputes through dialogue because Indo-Pak crises with nuclear dimensions have the potential to engulf China also. Whereas, interests of the United States in the region have changed with changes at the global level generally, the United States seeks security and stability in the region. But its interests with both countries have transformed over last few decades. Currently, US desires to avoid a major Indo-Pak conflagration because of its geopolitical interests which focus on containment of China, energy security, counter-terrorism and its presence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, being a weaker party, has always welcomed international mediation. It feels, by adopting a moralistic stance, it can win justice through international organizations like the UN. Alternatively it can promote its interests by allying with major powers like the US or China. On the other hand, India has refused to accept third-party mediation in South Asian affairs and has sought to resolve issues through bilateral means largely because of asymmetric balance of power in its favor. But due to Indian persistence on bilateralism, no dispute has been settled through two-party dialogue yet.

The history of last 67 years gives us four lessons:

- I. It was India which involved international community in the Kashmir conflict i.e. India went to United Nations in 1948 with a plea for ceasefire.
- II. After the ceasefire in 1965, Soviet Union brought both countries to the negotiating table for discussing post-war settlement, and normalization of their relations. USSR facilitated the process and subsequent negotiations resulted in 'Tashkent Agreement'.
- III. To date, two issues have been resolved between India and Pakistan i.e. water distribution and Rann of Kutch. Both were resolved by international arbitration. Indus Waters Treaty was a result of arbitration by World Bank¹⁰, while dispute over Rann of Kutch was arbitrated by an international tribunal.¹¹

IV. After 1972, India has refused third-party intervention, but history of crises between the two countries shows that all crises were diffused by intervention of international community and particularly the United States. US played an active role in diffusing crises of 1990, 1999, 2002 and 2008 as well.

In recent years, the US has been persuading India to resolve outstanding issues with Pakistan through dialogue.¹² Following reasons could be attributed to this American stance:

- a) US is presently engaged in Afghanistan and it does not wish that Pakistan should be distracted by another crisis along its eastern border
- b) CBMs and peace process with India provides Pakistan necessary time and space to meet host of internal challenges it is presently faced with.
- c) US seeks to project India as a counter-weight to China, and to fulfill this objective, India has to resolve its disputes with Pakistan or has to reach a mutual understanding where neither will destabilize the other.

These US objectives do not address the strategic anxieties of both nations. The interests of India, Pakistan and US have their respective interests in the region. They do not always converge and there is no blanket overlap of their interests. There appears to be commonality of interests between India and the US and Pakistan and US on certain issues. But what is common interest between India and US maybe to the detriment of Pakistan. Similarly for India, what is common between Pakistan and US is counter-productive for it. For example, in Afghanistan, interests of India and Pakistan are divergent and both have been persuading US to respect only their interests. Nonetheless, under unrelenting US pressure, both countries have been posturing to continue the talks but these talks have produced little substantial results on the core issues underlying the conflict.

Widening trust deficit

Advancing military postures, growing asymmetry of power and conventional imbalance has increased the trust deficit as the talks are held and discontinued without making any significant progress. In such an environment dialogue has failed to reduce the trust deficit.

From Islamabad's perspective, diplomatic behavior of India is the main hurdle in the way of making a headway between the two states. First, taking advantage of asymmetrical power ratio, India is in no hurry to show requisite level of willingness to resolve all outstanding disputes. Second, India has several times shown an inclination for imposing its own interpretation of diplomatic nuances, and when Pakistan doesn't accept Indian interpretation, then India resorts to delaying tactics as it believes time is on its side.

CBMs for crisis management not conflict resolution

Fundamentally CBMs are meant to create conditions conducive for conflict resolution as noted before, but in South Asia, CBMs have been used for conflict management, as most of the CBMs have been agreed in the aftermath of a crisis. A crisis erupts between India and Pakistan, international community intervenes and both countries get to the table for dialogue. The result is an agreement or a CBM to resolve the crisis and to ensure that the immediate cause of crisis does not occur again. After the 1971 war, both countries conclude the Shimla Agreement in 1972 and accepted the ceasefire line as LoC, in disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. Shimla agreement resolved the immediate conflict and both countries were successful in managing the immediate source of tension.

Similarly, in 1991, both countries signed an agreement on non- attack on each other's nuclear facilities and not to cooperate with a third country in doing so. Since 1992, both countries have since then been regularly exchanging lists of their nuclear facilities. This agreement was the result of prolonged negotiations after the 1984 crisis, during which Pakistan feared that India and Israel were working together to carry out a surprise attack on its nuclear installations and destroy its nascent nuclear infrastructure. Similarly, the 1991 agreement on "Advance Notice of Military Exercises, Maneuvers and Troop Movements" was a result of 1987 Brasstacks crisis.

But once these crises were resolved, or underlying sources of tension were lowered, and international attention shifted from South Asia, the implementation of the agreed CBMs were not pursued with much zeal. With the passage of a few months or couple of years another crisis would erupt, that would undo any progress that was made or cease the momentum that was earlier created. Thus a

new cycle of talks aimed at resolving triggers of new crisis would begin and whole exercise would be repeated.

No follow-up on CBMs

Another pattern emerging between Pakistan and India is that, once a CBM is concluded and put into practice, then further progress stops. Both nations have been regularly exchanging lists of their nuclear installations from 1992, and they even exchanged these lists during crises period i.e. in January 2002 and in 2009 respectively. This CBM has been one of the most successful CBMs between the two countries. But progress has stopped here. What next from here? There has not been any indication of moving towards devising a joint verification mechanism to ensure compliance to the CBM. Neither has this CBM led to advance discussions on nuclear doctrines, level of nuclear forces and other related issues. Hence, lack of new initiative taking aside from addressing the triggers of crisis has made CBMs an end in themselves.

Secrecy vs. transparency

A crucial aspect that entails CBMs and their progress is the dilemma inherent in military CBMs. Military policies and activities by their very nature demand secrecy more so from the adversary, and wherever, a CBM is agreed a reasonable ambiguity also exists. CBMs on the contrary, are meant for ensuring transparency in the military activities to diminish element of surprise. Trust deficit between Pakistan and Indian has also meant that existing CBMs won't be developed further into more cooperative activity leading to force reductions, redeployments of armies and weapons, mutual verification etc.

Absence of a timeframe

Mismatch of politico-strategic objectives further translates into absence of a time frame for resolving disputes. Indo-Pak talks show that there is a lack of urgency to resolve the outstanding disputes. Never have political leaders put a timeframe on their civilian and military bureaucracies to negotiate an agreement. Lack of time frame leaves matters to bureaucratic inertia, and progress moves at a snail's pace. Officials routinely express support for continued diplomatic engagement, but such talks mostly have not produced a meaningful progress.

An exception: Nuclear CBMs and Strategic Behavior

In the history of CBMs between India and Pakistan, most successfully implemented CBMs have been related to nuclear issues. Over the period of last 25 years, both countries have negotiated four nuclear CBMs:

- 1988 agreement on Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities
- Since 1992, both countries have been exchanging lists of respective nuclear installations and facilities, under 1988, agreement annually.
- 2005 agreement on advance notification of ballistic missile tests.
- 2007 agreement on Agreement On Reducing The Risk From Accidents Relating To Nuclear Weapons

Both countries have successfully implemented and maintained these CBMs even during the crises times. They continued to exchange list of respective nuclear facilities even during the tense days of 2002 and 2009 following the terrorist attacks in India. They have also refrained from issuing threats to attack other's nuclear installations during the crises times and even when forces were mobilized during 2002 crisis. Since 2005 each party has pre-notified the other about the upcoming test of a ballistic missile under the agreed CBM. In December 2011, both countries extended the validity of this agreement for another five year.

The question one needs to ask is why nuclear CBMs have been successfully implemented between the two adversaries when huge trust deficit exists between them?

Successful adherence to nuclear CBMs and their continued implementation during crises, underline that New Delhi and Islamabad realize the perils of misjudgment by nuclear weapon states. They realize the tremendous responsibility stemming from acquisition of nuclear weapons. Successful implementation of nuclear CBMs is a rational choice by responsible strategic actors that desire stability in a volatile region. Adherence to these CBMs even during crises times show that India and Pakistan have genuine interest in stabilizing the region, because being nuclear armed adversaries means war as an option has been ruled out. Even limited hostilities will not remain localized

because inadvertent escalation means international community will immediately intervene to de-escalate the crisis.

After the overt nuclearization this realization was emphasized during the Lahore declaration in 1999. Both countries committed to take concrete steps for averting a nuclear exchange. India and Pakistan agreed to “take immediate steps for reducing the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons and discuss concepts and doctrines with a view to elaborating measures for confidence building in the nuclear and conventional fields, aimed at prevention of conflict.”¹³

Conclusion

Dialogue processes and CBMs between India and Pakistan have been driven by mutual security concerns. Divergent strategic objectives in turn translate into mismatched political goals from the bilateral talks, and the resulting diplomatic discussions focus more on procedural aspects of the issues rather than steps for attaining peace and resolving disputes. Nonetheless, India and Pakistan have been successful in negotiating several agreements and measures for controlling tensions and to avoid unintended wars, because majority of these CBMs have been a product of wars and crises. But both adversaries have learned lessons and put in place CBMs to resolve the crises and manage conflict with the support of external powers. But this is management of conflict not a step towards resolution of disputes, that have been compounded since partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

As CBMs agreed to by India and Pakistan only have limited aim of averting unintended hostilities, hence they are temporary measures. Larger conflict situation has endured as underlying disputes have not been addressed. Moreover, both sides have tried to change the *status quo* according to their desired strategic objectives and political goals which translates into creating misperceptions. Unless both states perceive mutuality of interests for seeking resolution of disputes and this is matched by necessary transformations in strategic behavior that builds necessary confidence in the other, any CBMs or peace talks that only serve the interests of one state or the other and not of both equally will definitely fail.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The term “Enduring rivalry” is borrowed from T.V Paul. He defines “enduring rivalry” as strategic competitions that extend over a long period of time or over a generation or more that involve the same pair of states, and that have multiple crises and wars, see, “Why has the India-Pakistan Rivalry Been so Enduring? Power Asymmetry and an Intractable Conflict”, *Security Studies* 4, no 4 (2006): 600-630
- ² Christopher J. Pherson, “String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China’s Rising Power,” Strategic Studies Institute, July 2006, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB721.pdf>.
- ³ Robert Kaplan, “Pakistan’s Fatal Shore,” *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2009, accessed January 18, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/05/pakistans-fatal-shore/307385/>.
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- ⁵ Harsh V. Pant, “The Afghanistan Conflict: India’s Changing Role,” *Middle East Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2011): 31.
- ⁶ Ibid. p. 32
- ⁷ Saurav Jha, “India’s Strategic Footprint in Central Asia,” *World Politics Review*, December 13, 2011, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10924/indias-strategic-footprint-in-central-asia-part-i>.
- ⁸ Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2012), 248
- ⁹ A.G. Noorani, “The truth about Agra,” *Frontline*, July 16, 2005, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2215/stories/20050729002104400.htm>.
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- ¹² Stephanie Flamenbaum and Megan Neville, “Optimism and Obstacles in India-Pakistan Peace Talks,” United States Institute of Peace, July 15, 2011, accessed January 31, 2014, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/optimism%20and%20obstacles%20in%20india-pakistan%20peace%20talks.pdf>.
- ¹³ Government of India, “Lahore Declaration February, 1999,” Ministry of External Affairs, February 21, 1999, accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?18997/Lahore+Declaration+February+1999>.