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# Assessing the dialogue process

**T**he month of August this year is significant in the realm of Indo-Pak relations because the process of composite dialogue covering wide range of areas continued with a reassurance from both sides to sustain talks for dealing with contentious issues. Predictably, the current dialogue process has ended without tangible results but given the fact that experts from India and Pakistan talked about conflicts ranging from Kashmir to Siachen, Wuller Barrage, Sir Creek is a positive indication that both neighbours want to prevent the outbreak of another round of cold war. On other issues ranging from peace and security to trade, people to people contacts, terrorism, drugs and cultural ties also, there is no major agreement yet it has been agreed by India and Pakistan to keep the dialogue process going on till the time some breakthrough is achieved.

While assessing the process of composite dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad, it becomes quite clear that the two sides have gained some confidence in dealing with issues in which the immediate past threatened an all out war on their borders. India and Pakistan have passed the stage of serious tension and their relations, although, not normal to the full extent, are better than the post-December 2001 period. The outside world is also viewing with great interest, if not suspicion, the outcome of the New Delhi-Islamabad normalisation process because from their point of view if some meaningful headway is made in the composite dialogue, at least there will be some hope for peace in South Asia. Along with the extra-regional actors, the people of South Asia in general and India and Pakistan in particular are also excited about the dialogue process and their expectations for a positive outcome of talks makes sense because they are the ones who are the "real sufferers" of India-Pakistan hostility and their stakes for peace and stability in New Delhi-Islamabad relations are quite obvious. It is only a handful of minority composed of hard liners and vested interest groups whose future depends on sustained cold war and hostility between India and Pakistan and because of their proximity and penetration in the power circles of the two countries they have managed to wield considerable influence so as to sabotage the past talks and are confident that in present circumstances also they have the capability to wreck the dialogue process.

Although, the "spoilers" from the two sides have kept a low profile in the present composite dialogue process and have cleverly refrained from openly criticising talks which are held by India and Pakistan to resolve contentious and less contentious issues, they are quite firm and clear in their main objective: to prevent the final resolution of Indo-Pak conflicts, particularly of Jammu and Kashmir. The question is to what extent the Congress led government in New Delhi and the Musharraf regime in Islamabad will confront all such elements in the days to come because sooner or later, a stage may arrive when the best options and solution for resolving contentious



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issues will be again discussed and considered for implementation by the two sides. So far, what India and Pakistan have done is to get out of the cold war situation, re-identify the areas of conflict and cooperation and re-start the process of dialogue. The January 6 agreement between India and Pakistan which was reached in the sidelines of the SAARC summit held in Islamabad created conditions for resuming the normalisation process. Now eight months down the road, several rounds of talks under the composite dialogue have been held divided into various baskets but without rendering tangible results. Both sides have upheld their positions, whether it is the question of J&K or granting Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to India or reaching an agreement on withdrawing forces to pre-1984 position in the Siachen, but the stage has arrived when not only the people of India and Pakistan, other South Asian countries and also from the outside world are expecting results of the composite dialogue process. Extensive talks have been held by the two sides in the months of July and August; issues which cause conflict and which may be a basis of cooperation have been identified but India and Pakistan have not abandoned their stated positions on various contentious issues. If no agreement is signed by the two countries on the occasion of Foreign Minister's meeting scheduled to be held this September, the implications may be disastrous. Hawkish and hard line elements will get another chance to augment tension and put pressure to end the dialogue process. Talks cannot go on for ever and there must be some logical conclusion to the process which has been unleashed by India and Pakistan in the shape of composite dialogue. Hence, there is some relevance to the time frame of the dialogue process provided the two sides, along with Kashmiri groups are able to reach a respectable and reasonable agreement.

**A**ssessment of composite dialogue would include at least five important realities. First, the overall atmosphere which prevailed in these talks. Generally, Indo-Pak talks were held in a cordial and congenial environment, with the two sides expressing a great degree of optimism and warmth but remained very careful and cautious. The vocabulary of diplomatic jargon was fully used by India and Pakistan to satisfy people about the course, if not the outcome of talks. Seldom, there was any obvious stalemate or elevation of temperature in these talks and the two sides remained professionally very sound. Second, to a large extent, the media of India and Pakistan covered the process of composite dialogue in a positive manner. Although, the vernacular press followed the same old

rhetoric, retrogressive and reactionary approach while covering the India-Pak talks, but generally, the role of print and electronic media of the two countries remained better. Probably, the manner in which these talks were carried out gave little chance to media to gossip or create negative impression of talks. Third, the talks, which were held at the foreign secretary level, expressed a great deal of professionalism. Joint statements were issued by the two sides saying the process of talks was going smoothly and predicting the continuation of the dialogue process in future also. There was no abrupt conclusion of talks and no walk out from either side.

Fourth, unlike the past a lot of home work was done in the process of composite dialogue despite knowing that such an exercise may not render any immediate positive results. Even then, both sides did sound paper work in dealing with almost one dozen of contentious and less contentious issues. It means, the policy-makers from the two sides learnt lessons from the past experiences of talks and made sure that despite clear asymmetry in their positions, they would not create a negative impression to the outside world. Because of the manner in which the composite dialogue was held proved to the outside world that there is an element of seriousness and clarity in Indo-Pak talks and the future may look bright if the same approach is pursued by the two sides in the days to come. Finally, both India and Pakistan have given the impression to the world that despite the lack of any concrete progress in these talks, there exists a possibility of some breakthrough in future talks. Not a single expression, either from the Indian or the Pakistani side was witnessed which proved some unpleasantness in talks. On the contrary, both sides remained contented and hopeful that the process of composite dialogue would continue. No doubt, the nature of Indo-Pak conflicts, particularly of Jammu and Kashmir is such that it is illogical to expect plausible results in just one session of the composite dialogue. That conflicts which have sustained for more than five decades and have become part of the culture of two neighbours cannot be resolved in a couple of months.

With all the arguments which are given in favour of not expecting positive results from the composite dialogue process in a short span of time, one also needs to be mindful of the fact that both India and Pakistan must draw a line about the final outcome of talks. If no success is achieved in the composite dialogue process in coming one year time, it will seriously undermine the capability and credibility of New Delhi and Islamabad. The issues and problems faced by India and Pakistan and other countries of South Asia are such that neither the present nor the future generations of this region can afford to wait for long to seek peace and stability. Perhaps, the meeting of Indo-Pakistan foreign ministers in September would witness some breakthrough in bettering relations of the two major South Asian countries.