**Beyond backchannel talks**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-04-28

IT is no more a secret. The two hostile neighbours have been talking to each other. Backchannel contacts between India and Pakistan have led to some melting of the ice. Over the past months, the guns have fallen silent along the Line of Control and the rhetoric is down on both sides.

It`s certainly a good omen for what is described as a most combustible region. But it may be too soon to expect any dramatic change in the situation given the nature of the beast. Wishing for peace is one thing but the reality cannot be overlooked.

There are too many hurdles to cross before the two countries locked in perpetual conflict can be even expected to enter into a substantive dialogue on critical issues of mutual concern. So much has changed over the past two years that it is more difficult now to go beyond mere talk. While of late there is a lot more optimism attached to the thaw in the ranks of Pakistani of ficialdom, there is far less enthusiasm in India at the prospect.

Senior Pakistani officials have now confirmed that the intelligence chiefs of the two countries have been engaged in secret talks for months. It was apparently an Indian initiative that Pakistan responded to positively. The contacts remained secret before some Indian media reports blew the lid off them.

One UA E diplomat`s statements that his country hosted the parleys authenticated the reports.

Interestingly, hours after our foreign minister`s denial of such engagement, a senior source provided the media with the details of the ongoing backchannel negotiation. According to reports, he sounded extremely optimistic about the progress made in the talks. He was quoted as saying that New Delhi was willing to discuss all outstanding issues including Kashmir.

There is, however, still no official Indian comment on such a dialogue. The only statement made by the Indian foreign ministry in the second week of April said: `Our respective High Commissions exist and are functioning. That is a very effective channel of communication.` There is no indication as yet of how serious Prime Minister Narendra Modi`s government is about going beyond talkingabout talks to discuss all critical issues including Kashmir.

For sure, backchannel diplomacy is a useful means to break deadlocks between countries.

Backchannel secrecy permits participants to probe quietly to ascertain whether a change in policy is possible without attracting public scrutiny. It works well in times of crises.

In the past, backchannel dialogue between India and Pakistan has delivered substantive results. Not only did it help ease tensions between the two, it also dealt with some thorny issues that would not have been possible in open negotiations.

It was backchannel contacts that led to the Lahore process in 1999 during Nawaz Sharif`s second term in of fice. It was a historic moment when the then Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee travelled to Lahore on a bus.

Unfortunately, the process that promised to bring stability to the region was doomed because of civilmilitary disagreement.

Interestingly, it was Gen Pervez Musharraf, whose Kargil misadventure was blamed for derailing the L ahore process, who initiated the most substantive peace process with India. It happened a year after the two nations came very close to war.

It was again Vajpayee`s visit to Islamabad that led to the most sustained backchannel diplomacy bringing the two countries close to a historic agreement dealing with the Kashmir dispute. The fourpoint formula would have made the LoC irrelevant allowing the Kashmiri people to move freely. But the political turmoil in the country that led to the ouster of Musharraf ended the process.

Both backchannels involved seasoned diplomats and civilian of ficials though it was the military that was in power during the peace process in 2004.

Another important thing was that both sides were publicly committed to the agenda though the negotiations were conducted secretly.

But the situation today is very different to what led to the previous normalisation process. The usurpation of whatever autonomy was lef t to Indiaheld Kashmir and New Delhi`s attempt to change the demography of the disputed state have madethe situation much more complicated. The 2019 intrusion of the Indian Air Force inside Pakistan and Modi`s warmongering had heightened the tension between the two nations.

Pakistan had earlier refused to talk to New Delhi without the reversal of India`s unilateral accession of the disputed territory. That conditionality has now been set aside. Indian leaders in public statements have made it very clear that there was no question of reversal on India`s Kashmir policy. But of ficials in high places here maintain that India is open for discussion on Kashmir too.

There is no harm in using backchannel diplomacy to break the stalemate. The ceasefire on the LoC is certainly a positive development. But New Delhi`s silence over the talks raises some questions about our own optimism. There is no indication that the Modi government has ceased its military action in occupied Kashmir. The human rights violations there continue unabated. It`s hard to understand the statement by our officials that India is willing to `restore Kashmir`s statehood`.

Unlike in the past, the latest backchannel talks have apparently involved our intelligence chief s. It limits the scope of discussion on a matter that is largely political and diplomatic in nature. Going by reports, one is justified in asking who is taking the lead on this: the Pakistani security establishment or the civilian government? One cannot agree more with senior officials that war has never produced any solution and that the two nuclear powers cannot afford a conflict. But there is also a need for greater clarity on the objectives. One needs to tread a more cautious path when engaging in critical talks on conflict resolution. Our response must be calculated and not unrealistic. It`s certainly not a `saas-bahu` equation as senior official sources have described the crisis that exists between the two nuclear powers. It goes much further than that.  The writeris the author o/No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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