

Whither composite dialogue process

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It is too good to have, than not to have, and continue with the composite dialogue process (than go back to the dark years of hostility) in which the parties may repeat too-often repeated positions for too long but they have to reach some compromise in the end. The first round of composite dialogue in six-plus-two areas will be completed by the mid of August, perhaps, only to show to the political leadership where and on what there is a need for adjustment, compromise and the room for give and take across areas. However, the problem with our bureaucrats is that whenever the negotiation starts, which are rare and after long years, they go back to square one and before they come back to the areas of agreement reached long ago, the tempo of negotiations process gets exhausted, given our too much impatience about the outcome. How to approach and handle this process that it becomes meaningful and self-sustaining?

The newspapers are full with the headlines of the 'failure of talks' on Wullar Barrage or Tulbul waterway, Siachin and Sir Creek while forecasting the much-predicted 'failure' of the negotiation rounds next week on terrorism, narcotics, trade and economic cooperation. Few have taken note of the remarkable progress on security and nuclear confidence-building measures that had preceded the subsequent rounds in other areas. No doubt, the first negotiation round had to be confined to stating of well-known positions, at least, to the concerned officials and assess the attitude and inclination of the two sides. But it becomes too comical, and the press rightly gets edgy for not getting a story worthy of a headline, when one does not hear for the eighth time even about the progress that was made decades ago on a certain issue.

The issue of Siachin is a case in point to point out how consistent and steadfast are our bureaucrats at not inching forward from the understanding their predecessors had reached about a decade and a half ago. The top officials have had discussed the Siachin issue eight times, including four rounds between the defense secretaries and also a breakthrough round between prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Rajiv Gandhi in 1989 when they had agreed to settle it. While India was reportedly ready to redeploy its forces to Zingrulma, Pakistan was willing to withdraw to Bailfond glacier. Yet the two defense delegations, who have met after seven years, agreed (for the seventh time) to "have further discussions" on the modalities of demilitarisation and redeployment of forces to end a senseless and worthless military standoff since 1984. It also shows that even if we agree to settle an issue, we are constrained and more inclined not to implement what was once agreed between us.

As reported by *The Hindu*, the Cabinet Committee on Security under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had met and is understood to have reviewed New Delhi's position that in-

cludes re-demarcating LoC beyond grid NJ 9842, withdrawal of troops to agreed position after recording the existing positions (?), defining a no-war zone, signing of an agreement not to reoccupy the vacated positions or occupying other positions, not permitting military patrols and mountaineering expeditions. On the other hand, Islamabad wants the withdrawal of forces to the pre-1972 position. The fact of the matter is that the Indian incursion into the Siachin glacier was in violation of Simla Agreement, as was the Kargil misadventure or cross-border terrorism, and it should have been long ago reversed. Perhaps, it seems if one is optimistic, a major breakthrough was not announced on Siachin and, may be, Sir Creek on which differences are still wide, to keep the final print or give-and-take for the talks at the foreign ministers' level in September (?). Pending possible agreements on certain areas for trade-offs across sectors may be good diplomacy, but running too much after linkages may elude us the benefit of reaching agreements in areas where it is easier to find a settlement that can, in turn, potentially facilitate resolution of more protracted conflicts.

The prolongation of such a mad conflict over no-man's land, where, whether frost killed more soldiers than in actual combat, shows how difficult and reluctant the two sides are in resolving even a conflict that doesn't make any sense at all to any of the two sides. If it is so, as it is a fact that we have not solved the Siachin conflict for the last two decades that the two sides agree is madness, then what would be the pace to solve the most intractable of all issues, Kashmir? It is not hard to predict that resolution of the dispute over Kashmir, on which the positions are too much antagonistic, will not be easy nor can it be found in a manner one or the other side wishes to find. The positive thing is that the ceasefire is sticking and the confidence building measures are being taken. Although President General Musharraf has denied having insisted upon a fixed timeframe, it is obvious that he and his administration are too eager for a 'reasonable timeframe' and link the sustainability of CBMs to the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. His mentioning of "year and a half" to resolve Kashmir dispute, he has clarified, was "in response to a question on the attitude of India that it could not be rushed into a final settlement." But, it may be asked, never in the history of negotiations the parties had ever fixed a timeframe and negotiations often went on too long and on quite frivolous matters. Linking continuity of CBMs to the settlement of Kashmir issue or insisting upon tandem progress on both Kashmir and other areas — although reflect General Musharraf's compulsion to show progress on what he emphasizes as the 'core issue' while restraining militancy across the LoC — this approach may not help sustain the dialogue process if we insist upon simultaneity of dialogue on all issues that makes sense. But if we say that progress in any other area will be dependent upon the progress on Kashmir, the composite

dialogue is foredoomed. What must be realised is that in pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations, measures are taken to manage the conflict and stabilise the situation. If India, lets us suppose and it may be true, does not respond as quickly as we want will we discontinue the process and withdraw the CBMs? If so, will we be going back to a situation of military standoff or cross-border conflict while closing all avenues of interaction? Will it be possible or useful for us? Will the world allow? Can we afford it while fighting the war against terrorism that has now expanded to every nook and corner of our country? While we know very well that India is still not prepared for the flexibility it must for the resolution of the Kashmir conflict, pushing the process beyond a certain pace, regardless of the preparedness of the interlocutor, tantamount to play into the hands of those extremists who have stakes in the perpetuation of the conflict.

Indeed, India has accepted Kashmir as a bilateral issue to be finally settled through peaceful means, as all bilateral agreements/declarations and joint statements show. What is not acceptable or what is not to the satisfaction of the two sides, is also well known to the interlocutors. However, what is not clear is that what kind of a solution will satisfy just not the two parties but also the third and the real party — the Kashmiris. It is also not still clear whether it will be a protracted process that will produce a solution that will not damage the so-called legitimate interests of the two occupying parties. Instead of wrangling over the solutions that suit one party or the other, it is better to set the direction of the process acceptable to two sides, instead of insisting on a timeframe. The best approach to move forward is that we cover as many areas as possible and continue to build confidence to tackle difficult issues without making mutually beneficial cooperation a hostage to one issue or the other.

The parties have shown some flexibility that is why the process is in place. They must show greater flexibility and narrow down the areas of differences while expanding the areas of agreement and cooperation. In the meanwhile, India must realise that the process will not move forward as it wants. It will have to show flexibility and make the process equally rewarding for the other side. Parroting LoC as a permanent line as solution or analogously referring to the Sino-Indian talks as a model will not help rope in Islamabad. A debate has to be opened in New Delhi to explore new possibilities. The peace process is in its infancy and still too fragile. The trust between the two sides is still very low. There are very deep apprehensions and the two sides don't have any hope in each other. That has to be built without hindering the people to interact. The foreign ministers meeting must make some headway to keep the momentum. Lastly, Musharraf has shown a measure of flexibility, so should Manmohan Singh, the son of our soil.

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