**The long impasse**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-10-25

WHILE Pakistan has been preoccupied with developments in Afghanistan it has not taken its eye off its eastern neighbour with whom relations remain tense and troubled. The diplomatic impasse between the two countries continues with formal dialogue long suspended and toughly worded statements exchanged every so often. The latest was Islamabad`s condemnation last week of a provocative pronouncement by India`s home minister who threatened `surgical strikes` against Pakistan. In response the foreign ministry accused Delhi of `stoking regional tensions`.

Nevertheless, backchannel communication at the intelligence level continues. This was set in motion over two years ago. But it has made no progress towards resuming the broad-based peace process.

The start-stop process was known at various points as `Composite Dialogue`, `Resumed Dialogue` and `Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue`. It was abandoned by India many years ago. No agreement has been reached on the backchannel to restore normal diplomatic representation after it was downgraded and trade halted by Pakistan. This followed Delhi`s illegal annexation of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019.

The backchannel contact did however lead to the February 2021 re-commitment by Pakistan and India to observe a ceasefire on the Line of Controlin line with a 2003 understanding. From the dangerous confrontation epitomised by the Balakot crisis two years ago, the two countries stepped back from the brink and agreed to the LoC truce. The ceasefire has since held. But expectations that this thaw would pave the way for normalisation of ties have not been realised. Despite apparent assurances on the backchannel by the Indian side to ease the situation in Kashmir, restore its `statehood` and dial down its aggressive rhetoric none of this happened.

Backchannel communication may have played a role in managing tensions but its limits have been laid bare by lack of movement on substantive issues.

There has recently been working-level diplomatic engagement on practical issues such as civilian prisoners, issuance of visas to officials and fishermen detained for maritime trespassing. These discussions may well yield agreement on such issues in thecoming days. But this does not presage movement towards a dialogue on substantive issues or disputes that have long divided the two countries the most outstanding of course being Kashmir.

Pakistan has repeatedly declared that dialogue can only resume if India rescinds it Aug 5, 2019, actions. Meanwhile, India`s repression in Kashmir shows no sign of easing with continuing grave violations of human rights. The situation remains dire with sweeping restrictions, a military siege and suspension of fundamental freedoms. Since the socalled integration of the state into the Indian union and abrogation of Article 370 of its constitution the government of Narendra Modi has pursued a policy to bring about demographic changes, in utter violation of UN Security Council resolutions, and to delimit electoral constituencies. Both aim to reduce the Muslim majority by shifting the balance to Hindus. These actions have drawn strong protests from Islamabad and been roundly rejected by the people of occupied Kashmir. The deepening alienation and growing anger of the Kashmiri people underlines Delhi`s failure to secure their acquiescence by the use of force, fraud and economic inducements.

Modi`s efforts to enlist support for his Kashmir strategy from traditionally pro-India Kashmiri politicians have also ended in failure. In June 2021, he invited these leaders to a round table conference on Kashmir. The genuine representatives of the Kashmiri people, who form the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, were excluded. They denounced this meeting as nothing more than a drama. Meanwhile, APHC leaders continue to languish in jail or house detention.

The aim of Modi`s move was to consolidate the August 2019 action by seeking to establish a facade of `normality` and enticing select politicians to rejoin a revived political process. By showing its intent to initiate a political process in Kashmir the Modi government has tried to persuade people at home and abroad that the situation is `normalising`. It sought agreement for the delimitation plan to pave the way for so-called elections in Kashmir, which in turn would aim to `endorse` the 2019 action. But even handpicked Kashmiri leaders did not fall forthis bait. The meeting produced no outcome and ended in failure.

In this backdrop and persisting deadlock the future outlook for Pakistan-India relations is exceedingly uncertain. Immediate prospects are anything but bright. Looking ahead, three possible scenarios can be postulated for the future course of relations. The best-case but unlikeliest scenario is for the peace process to resume, cover all issues including Kashmir and other disputes, as well as trade and terrorism, two issues of priority for India.

Serious efforts would be directed to conflict resolution and a result-oriented process set in train that encourages both sides towards compromise to achieve a negotiated settlement of core issues. This scenario is urged by the stark reality that strategic dynamics between the two nuclear neighbours remain fraught and unpredictable. But there is no possibility of the scenario materializing in the near term.

A second scenario is arguably the most unstable in which an acrimonious stand-of f persists and mounting tensions sparked by an incident or action spin out of control. Escalatory steps by one or both parties heighten the risk of a crisis. The nuclear f actor prevents an outbreak of conflict but the two countries become locked in deadly confrontation raising the danger of uncontrollable escalation.

The third scenario is more of the same. Formal dialogue remains suspended, disputes are left to fester, low-level diplomatic engagement takes place but no headway is made to normalise ties. A backchannel tries to manage tensions and prevent them from boiling over even as a war of words erupts from time to time. This seems the most probable scenario for now. With Delhi ruling out talks on Kashmir and Pakistan unable to agree to a dialogue minus Kashmir it is hard to see how this impasse can be overcome. The prospect then is for Pakistan and India to continue in an uneasy state of no war, no peace with management of tensions being the principal focus of sporadic if quiet diplomacy. But on this count too both countries have yet to put a proper framework in place to manage tensions.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.