

# Another wasted year in Indo-Pakistan ties

INDIA-PAKISTAN relations have always had a chequered history, with very few ups and many more downs. The year 2009 will probably rank as one of the more barren years in their history. In effect, there was a deadlock in relations, despite two summit level meetings: one in June between President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the periphery of a multilateral moot in Russia, and a second meeting in July 2009 in Sharm-al-Sheikh in Egypt, again on the sidelines of an international conference, between Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and his Indian counterpart. The initiative for the meeting in each case seems to have been taken by Pakistan which kept urging India, throughout the year, to resume the composite dialogue. The latter seemed unenthusiastic about holding any kind of meeting with Pakistan and when such a meeting became unavoidable, it showed little flexibility in the talks.

In November 2008, India had been shocked by a terrorist incident in Mumbai which, it said, had been plotted in Pakistan and carried out by some terrorists belonging to the

By Shahid M. Amin

Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), a Pakistan-based organisation, long involved in militancy in Indian-occupied Kashmir. LeT has been a kind of *bête noire* for New Delhi, as also its prime suspect, whenever any terrorist incident takes place in India. Moreover, for years, India has accused Pakistan of harbouring terrorist outfits and sponsoring cross-border terrorism inside Indian-occupied Kashmir and even elsewhere in India.

For some weeks after the Mumbai incident, India issued open or veiled threats of punitive action against Pakistan. International diplomacy, mainly by the US, became active to prevent a military confrontation. Not surprisingly, bilateral relations took a nosedive as war clouds hovered over the subcontinent. The composite dialogue that had started in 2004 came to a dead halt. Pakistan did condemn the Mumbai outrage in the strongest terms and its leaders promised all possible cooperation, but India was indignant when Pakistani officials initially denied that any Pakistanis were involved in the Mumbai incident. But later, the

Pakistan interior minister accepted that the sole surviving terrorist, Ajmal Kasab, was indeed a Pakistani national and there was involvement of the LeT in the Mumbai carnage.

Though the war fever in India gradually subsided, relations between the two countries throughout 2009 remained a hostage of the Mumbai incident. India kept insisting that Pakistan must take severe action against the LeT, which it said was based in Muridke, and prosecute its head, Hafiz Saeed, and his associates who had allegedly planned this attack. Pakistan urged India to provide details of involvement of the LeT so that legal proceedings could be initiated against its leaders in Pakistani courts. Some dossiers were exchanged during the year but were found insufficient for securing indictment by Pakistani courts. Indeed, Hafiz Saeed, who had been detained, secured his release when a Pakistani court found that charges against him could not be substantiated. For its part, India kept contending that it had provided all the requisite information to Pakistan,

and it was merely stalling and slow-peddalling by asking for more information. The two countries were thus engaged in a kind of 'dossier diplomacy' for the greater part of the year.

The first summit-level Indo-Pakistan meeting, held in Russia, was seen by some observers as an Indian rebuff to Pakistan since Prime Minister Singh was seen, in front of the media, as telling President Zardari that the only issue he was 'authorised' to discuss was the Mumbai incident and Pakistan's involvement in terrorism. He demanded that Pakistan should take effective action not only against the culprits but also stamp out the 'networks' of terrorism in Pakistan. The two leaders agreed, however, that matters would be discussed further by their foreign secretaries. Little, however, came out from the meeting of the two top diplomats.

The second summit-level meeting in July 2009 was more productive. A joint statement was issued by the two prime ministers at the conclusion of their meeting. India agreed

to delink bilateral talks from the issue of terrorism. This looked like a major retreat from its hard-line position on resumption of peace talks. The joint statement also mentioned that Balochistan had been discussed. This was in the context of Pakistan's accusations that India was abetting anti-state activities of secessionists in Balochistan. Prime Minister Gilani could thus rightfully claim that the Sharmal-Sheikh meeting had been successful from Pakistan's point of view. On the other hand, Prime Minister Singh came under fierce criticism in India, particularly by the main opposition party, the BJP, for his apparent retreat from India's erstwhile stance. Soon enough, Singh started to back-track on the joint statement. The new Indian Foreign Minister Krishna has kept insisting that talks could resume only after Pakistan had taken action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai incident. Thus, the hard-liners in India had the final say in the matter and India-Pakistan talks remained stymied.

Later in the year, there were allegations by some official quarters in Pakistan that India was also supplying arms to Taliban insurgents in

Waziristan where the Pakistan army had launched a big military operation. The army had found Indian arms and medical supplies in some of the captured camps of the Taliban. This looked like a paradox since India has long been highly critical of the Taliban and other Islamic militants for posing a grave security threat to India. (Defence minister A.K. Antony said on June 25, 2009 that "the Taliban are a threat to world peace, our region and a real threat to India.")

Bilateral relations were further strained in November when the Indian army chief raised Islamabad's concerns by hinting at the possibility of a limited nuclear war with Pakistan.

Some observers saw a deliberate Indian strategy against Pakistan behind these developments during 2009, citing the following reasons. Firstly, they noted that throughout the year, India had refused to resume the 'composite' peace dialogue between the two countries, by making the Mumbai incident as the make-or-break issue. India said that talks could resume only after Pakistan had taken effective action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai incident. But India was slow in providing the kind of concrete evidence that could have led to conviction of the accused in Pakistani courts. In any event, since India itself had conceded that there was no Pakistani official involvement in the Mumbai incident, why then should bilateral relations have become hostage to actions by the

terrorists? Hence, it could be suspected that India had merely used the Mumbai incident to stall peace talks with Pakistan.

Secondly, Islamabad seemed convinced of Indian support for the secessionists in Balochistan. If true, this looked like a repeat of the 1971 Bangladesh situation. Many in Pakistan continue to believe that

Lugar Bill, unless that was done under the most stringent conditions. Fourthly, the barely concealed threat of the Indian army chief for a limited war against Pakistan seemed like a clue to India's hostile stratagems against Pakistan. Finally, Pakistan kept complaining during the year that India was trying to restrict the flow of river water to

would be against any such conflagration in the subcontinent. So would be the West and indeed the rest of the world. Thirdly, any Indian support to the Taliban would be highly short-sighted as Islamic extremism has been the main security threat to India for the last two decades. Indeed, the sensible thing for India at this time would be to support the

reasons that should help prevent any Indo-Pakistan conflagration, the two countries need to look at matters in a much more positive way. Peace and cooperation in the subcontinent is as much in India's interest as it is in Pakistan's interest. Their economic welfare demands such cooperation. Projects like the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline would bring immense benefits to both countries. SAARC has the potential to transform South Asia just as ASEAN has done in Southeast Asia. The masses in the subcontinent, who have much in common, yearn for friendship. Disappointing as 2009 has been in the context of Indo-Pakistan relations, one must not, therefore, lose hope that at some point of time, sooner rather than later, wisdom will prevail over short-sightedness.

It is noteworthy that during 2009, Pakistan kept pressing the US to play a role in defusing India-Pakistan tensions and also help resolve the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan was unable to secure a positive US response. A US spokesman explained on 27 June 2009 that the "United States will support a dialogue between India and Pakistan to promote regional stability but will leave it to the two countries to chart their own course of action." In the Indian-occupied Kashmir, protests and resistance continued despite occasional efforts by the Indian government to open a dialogue with Kashmiri separatists. As always, the shadow of Kashmir kept hanging over Indo-Pakistan relations during the year. ■

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India has never been reconciled to the partition of 1947 and looks for every possible opportunity to destabilise or destroy Pakistan. That could explain the supply of arms and equipment to the Taliban, despite India's professed opposition to Islamic militants. Thirdly, during the year, India kept trying to convince the US not to supply arms and other aid to Pakistan under the Kerry-

Pakistan in violation of the Indus Waters Treaty.

As against the above, some arguments could also be advanced which suggest the contrary. Firstly, war would be destructive for both India and Pakistan since they are nuclear powers possessing missile delivery systems. The US, which is deeply involved in its own war against the Al Qaeda and its Taliban allies,

Pakistani state which is involved in a mortal combat with the Islamic extremists, who have now become the common enemies of both countries. In the worst scenario, if the extremists do succeed and Pakistan is destabilised, Islamic extremism would become rampant in the region and the resultant situation would pose a far more grave threat to India.

Apart from the foregoing negative