

Determining the level of talks

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THE level at which the scheduled composite dialogue between India and Pakistan should commence was the subject of Tuesday's meeting between Pakistan's foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri and the Indian high commissioner, Shiv Shankar Menon in Islamabad.

This would normally appear to be a routine matter of administrative detail. However, where the two South Asian neighbours are concerned, going by the past experience, it can be a matter of crucial, if not decisive, significance to the ultimate progress of the dialogue.

If the hope expressed by President Gen Pervez Musharraf, in the statement issued by him jointly with the Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee on January 7 that the "ice would melt sooner than later" is to materialize, the level even of the preliminary talks has to be carefully determined. While in India the political leadership generally has a major say in any foreign policy issue, in Pakistan the professional bureaucrats can sway the direction of the talks to suit their own hidden agenda. This is basically because the supremacy of the political leadership is an established tradition in India. Regrettably, the same cannot be said of Pakistan.

Almost from the outset the bureaucracy in Pakistan has played a high-profile role in the conduct of government business. Dr Ayesha Jalal was one of the first to identify this. The reason may or may not have been the weak political leadership with which Pakistan was burdened as she suggests, can be discussed ad infinitum. However, this is the reality and the influence of the bureaucracy even in the political sphere has to be reckoned with, especially if we regard the military establishment also as part of the bureaucracy.

The Pakistan foreign office which will inevitably have a key role in the composite India-Pakistan dialogue due to begin next month has for years been dominated and even dictated to by professional bureaucrats.

Several of them have been highly competent and gifted, but groomed within the somewhat rigid framework of bureaucracy nevertheless.

It is virtually a firm (and almost predictable) mindset which goes into the making of a policy in the foreign office, regardless of the personalities of the policy-framers involved. This is not to deny that a great many of them provide a mature and worthwhile inputs and have the capacity to frame worthwhile policy.

But on the whole, the mindset undergoes little change whether it is one set of top-level bureaucrats in the foreign office or another.

While the precise reasons for the failure of the Agra summit in July 2001 are not quite clear, the lack of flexibility on the part of the Pakistanis who could help their side make a clear break from the past was nevertheless discernible.

There was also little difference in the content and tone of the different briefings given to the media personnel by the spokesmen of the Pakistani foreign office and those of the army public relations.

This does not mean that perhaps the same was not the case on the Indian side. But, if memory serves one right, the Indian briefings were mostly conducted by the political leaders while on the Pakistan side, it was almost invariably the bureaucrats who carried the responsibility.

Incidentally, it would be unfair not to recognize that the well-reasoned on-camera briefing given by President Gen Pervez Musharraf summing up Pakistan's efforts to normalize relations while the summit was still in progress was generally appreciated and regarded as something of a coup de grace, even by many stalwarts on the Indian side.

However, to those who were there in Agra at the time it was also obvious that after the briefing the bonhomie demonstrated by the Indian official setup began to sour. Maybe that is what ultimately caused the summit to fizzle out. The then Indian foreign secretary, Ms Chokila Iyer, publicly stated that Pakistani observations had been "unhelpful" to the cause of better bilateral relations.

It is apparent that the scheduled resumption of the India-Pakistan dialogue to settle all bilateral issues and set the stage for better neighbourly relations is not being treated like a routine bureaucratic exercise. On the contrary, President Musharraf in his joint statement clearly called for the resumption of a composite dialogue, one ranging over the whole spectrum of India-Pakistan relations and not only some isolated aspects. The joint statement clearly said that a constructive dialogue would promote progress towards "the common objective of peace, security and economic development for our peoples and for future generations."

This gives reason to assume that the President would presumably keep a close watch on the progress of the bilateral talks from the outset and (hopefully) ensure that the initiative would remain with the political leadership. The bureaucrats, particularly, the professionals of the foreign office, would not function in isolation from the political leadership, something that at times was the case in past such meetings.

However, what is needed is for the political leadership in Pakistan to give firm guidelines, to those taking part in the proposed dialogue, within which they must stay. There has to be no more impulsive calls for jihad, no more glory to be sought by interfering in the internal affairs of the other. Overall, it is important that the spirit in which the joint statement was drawn up on January 7 should be strictly adhered to. As far as the interlocutors (bureaucrats) are concerned they should avoid interpreting the joint statement or the Declaration issued after the Saarc summit in their own respective ways.

There have been repeated reports that Pakistan and India agreed to meet primarily under pressure from the Americans. There is no way to verify this as the Americans persistently maintain that they did nothing of the kind.

However, one very significant factor which apparently pressured the two sides into getting together was the profusion of non-official large-scale exchange of visits between the people of the two countries which preceded a final agreement by the Indian prime minister to announce his intended participation in the Saarc. He had remained somewhat ambivalent about his presence until then.

Pakistanis and Indians travelled in their hundreds across the border, sometimes on foot, to attend scores of goodwill conferences, big and small. There was a time when the mandarins of the foreign office reacted rather sneeringly to such Track 2 contacts. This time there has been nothing to suggest that they continue to be sceptical.