

How to save the talks

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"THE Foreign Office seems to cultivate a reluctance to subordinate diplomatic tactics to the national interest and an insatiable appetite for nuances and conditions which can blur the clearest vision." — Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in her autobiography "The Downing Street Years."

The 'Iron Lady', one of the most distinguished British prime ministers, who remained at the helm of affairs for almost twelve years at a stretch and who was either an active player or a close witness to some of the momentous events of the later half of the twentieth century — Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Falkland's war, the beginning of the cracks in the Soviet Union, the rise of Gorbachev to power, the introduction of Perestroika, and the restoration of British pride after the Suez fiasco — certainly knows what she is talking about.

Her comments are all the more amazing because the British diplomats belong to a bureaucracy which is respected and envied all over the world for its efficiency, integrity and professionalism.

Now when diplomacy is picking up steam after the Islamabad joint statement, the inevitable question comes to the mind: can we entrust the Pakistan-India talks, on whose outcome the peace and prosperity of South Asia may depend, to the foreign office bureaucrats of the two countries? The answer is certainly in the negative for a variety of reasons.

First, negotiations on highly sensitive political issues is not the bureaucrats' run of the mill and, if history can be a reliable guide, they are bound to tumble into a pitfall sooner or later — in the case of India and Pakistan, sooner rather than later.

Another problem with foreign service officials is that they find it beyond them to jettison the baggage of history and break the barrier of distrust that has characterized bilateral relations between India and Pakistan for over half a century.

Syed Shahid Husain, himself a senior Pakistani bureaucrat, who led one of the several delegations to India to discuss water-related issues, has, in a recent column in this newspaper, referred to the warped sense of priorities of Pakistan foreign office officials. A dialogue is after all more than two monologues and a skilful negotiator will not let the words interfere with getting as much agreement as possible and as much acceptance as possible to obtain the ends he wants.

Even if we overlook a famous saying that

the perfect bureaucrat is the man who manages to make no decision and escapes all responsibility, the real problem with foreign office bureaucrats in India and Pakistan has been that they tend to defend the status quo even long past the time when the quo has lost the status. That is why Mr. Salman Haider, a distinguished former Indian foreign secretary, who led the first and only successful talks with Pakistan under the "composite dialogue" formula in 1997, has given a timely warning about the forthcoming India-Pakistan talks: there are many questions to resolve even before serious exchanges commence and foreign office officials in both countries can be "timid and obstructive" and will need to be "closely directed if the talks are not to bog down prematurely."

Pakistan and India have announced that

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they will hold talks on the commencement of the process of the composite dialogue from February 16 to 18 in Islamabad. The process will begin by meetings at director-general/joint secretary level leading to a meeting between the foreign secretaries of the two countries on February 18. The main purpose of these contacts will be to prepare the agenda for future talks.

It is important to note that the word used in the Islamabad joint statement as well as the announcement made by the foreign office spokesman is "commence" and not "resume". Does it mean that the progress already made by the two delegations under the June 1997 composite dialogue framework and endorsed in Lahore will be thrown in the dustbin and the whole process will start again?

Under the agreement reached between the Indian foreign secretary Salman Haider and Pakistan foreign secretary Shamshad Ahmed in 1997, the two countries had agreed on a comprehensive mechanism consisting of working groups at appropriate levels to discuss eight specific subjects including Jammu and Kashmir. This was no doubt a major breakthrough as the two countries had, for the first time, not only detailed all their bilateral issues in black and white but also agreed to address them. Some progress was also made on issues other than Kashmir at the Agra summit. It will, therefore, be a pity if tentative agreements already reached between the two

countries on such issues as the Wullar Barrage and the demarcation of the boundary at the Sir Creek are thrown overboard and we are back to square one.

Returning to the matter under discussion, the fact remains that whatever success the foreign secretaries of the two countries have been able to achieve so far relates only to such matters as agenda, procedure and modalities of the talks. Any success on matters of substance, the real challenging and sterner task, has eluded them so far.

It is true that there can be no real improvement in bilateral relations without addressing the issues that divide the two neighbours. However, when the dialogue on these issues begins, it will highlight the different expectations and objectives of the two sides. India, being the status quo state, is interested in maintaining it, while Pakistan is interested

in altering the status quo and realignment of territory. Given these basic differences, the half a century old Kashmir issue is not going to be solved overnight. The dialogue is going to be protracted, difficult, exacting and, sometimes, even pathless. For such a dialogue, ham-fisted and flat-footed conduct of negotiations will spell disaster.

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at a non-bureaucratic higher level, preferably by the foreign ministers of the two countries. Other issues of the composite dialogue may be addressed by working groups at appropriate levels, as envisaged by the 1997 agreement. In case the foreign minister are not available because of their other preoccupations, an appropriate middle way should be found to lead the talks.

As already argued at some length, substantive negotiations on issues like Kashmir cannot be managed at the bureaucratic level. It will be relevant to refer to the Sino-Indian boundary dispute which was addressed at secretary/foreign secretary level for about two decades without making an inch of headway. During his last June visit to China, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and his Chinese counterpart agreed to upgrade the negotiation to a political level and special representatives were appointed by both sides to take up the negotiation from the bureaucrats and figure out a formula to resolve the more than forty year old boundary dispute. If Islamabad and New Delhi are really earnest about resolving the more than half a century old Kashmir dispute, they have no option but to raise the level of negotiation to the political level and appoint special representatives to take up the challenge and find a workable solution of the Kashmir issue.

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