

# Promising start to dialogue

Pak - F. Kelahi - India  
Dawn  
25.2.04

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

FOLLOWING the landmark agreement between President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on January 6, India and Pakistan have started yet another dialogue that promises to be different from those held in the past. There is purposefulness, and a resolve to achieve a *modus vivendi*, to end the 56-year history of conflict and confrontation.

This writer has been associated with many of the past dialogues, dating back to the six rounds of Bhutto-Swaran Singh talks in 1962-63, the Tashkent Conference of 1966 and the Shimla Conference of 1972, that followed the conflicts of 1965 and 1971 respectively. Their impact on bilateral relations was transient, or as in the case of the 1962-63 talks, even negative.

The Tashkent Conference represented an effort to return to the status quo before the 1965 war, so that the territories occupied were returned, both in Kashmir and along the international border. The political issues between the two were hardly tackled, nor was there any follow-up, so that the two countries drifted into war within six years. To cut the Muslim state to size.

The Shimla Agreement can be regarded as a diplomatic success for Pakistan, because though negotiating under the shadow of military defeat, and with 90,000 prisoners in Indian custody, we got a document that safeguarded our position on Kashmir, and specifically

Council Resolution 1172.

Efforts to start a dialogue with India were made by Pakistan even before the BJP assumed power, notably during the prime ministership of Messrs Gowde and Gujral. An eight-point agenda had been agreed between the foreign secretaries in June 1997. With the major powers, notably the US, urging confidence building measures to reduce risk of a nuclear showdown, Prime Minister Vajpayee paid a dramatic visit to Lahore in February 1999, when he used the initiation of a bus service from New Delhi to hold a summit with the then Pakistan premier Nawaz Sharif.

Three documents were, signed at the conclusion of the 'bus summit': the Lahore Declaration between the prime ministers, that calls for intensive efforts to resolve all issues including that of Jammu and Kashmir, and for action to implement the composite agenda agreed between the

attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, concentrated most of its forces along the Pakistan border.

The eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation continued until October 2002, but though it was called off, it was not until April 2003, that Prime Minister Vajpayee took his third initiative in favour of resuming the dialogue which the international community had been pressing for. Continued Pakistan support to "cross-border terrorism" was made the excuse for not implementing the decision. Another six months passed, and with the Saarc summit, to be hosted by Pakistan, approaching, India had to decide whether to move forward or to obstruct a process the entire international community wanted to be resumed.

This lengthy historical background of the attempts at making peace is designed to put the recently started dialogue in perspective. There are lessons to be learnt from past efforts, and reasons for their failure to be analyzed. The Shimla Accord will remain a point of reference, since it marked the last time a commitment was made by both sides to resolving the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir. It was also a peace agreement signed after the last war fought by the two sides. The documents signed at Lahore in 1999, and the points agreed at Agra would also continue to figure. The Agenda for a composite dialogue was agreed in 1997, and is being adhered to since the issues and goals have not changed.

What will be eventually called the first or opening round of this dialogue was preceded by the agreement between President

The Shimla Agreement can be regarded as a diplomatic success for Pakistan because we got a document that safeguarded our position on Kashmir. India has been emphasizing the clause that calls for bilateral negotiations, which it interprets as ruling out a role for the UN, whereas the very first clause states that relations between the two will be governed by the princi-

called for a settlement of the dispute. India has been emphasizing the clause that calls for bilateral negotiations, which it interprets as ruling out a role for the UN, whereas the very first clause states that the relations between the two will be governed by the principles of the UN Charter.

The bilateral relations remained correct without being cordial from 1972 to 1989, with only routine references to Kashmir. This was a period dominated by two concerns. India having carried out a nuclear test in 1974, Pakistan felt that its security and survival demanded either international effort to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by India, or the acquisition of nuclear deterrence by Pakistan.

The second major development was the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979. Pakistan, which had been placed under sanctions for its nuclear programme by the Carter administration, became a frontline state in the last proxy conflict of the cold war.

As the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, which also marked the end of the cold war, Pakistan witnessed new challenges, as the US imposed sanctions on it under the Pressler Law in 1990, while the conflict and instability developed both in its west and east. An indigenous movement broke out in Kashmir in 1989, and while Pakistan avoided direct involvement, it could not deny moral, political and diplomatic support to the struggle of the Kashmiri people, that began in the "year of democracy" all over the world.

When India adopted a threatening attitude after its nuclear tests in May 1998, Pakistan responded by demonstrating its own nuclear capability through tests later in the same month. The asymmetry that had existed on the basis of imbalance in conventional weapons was virtually replaced by strategic parity, since the number of nuclear weapons is not relevant to deterrence. The fact that the two hostile neighbours were now nuclear armed led the international community to call for the solution of their disputes notably Kashmir, as reflected in UN Security

## ples of the UN Charter.

sides; a joint statement by the two foreign ministers on follow-up action, and a memorandum of understanding between the foreign Secretaries, calling for joint measures to promote nuclear risk reduction.

Expectations were aroused of a transformation of bilateral relations through further meetings. However, an unexpected development reflecting lack of coordination between the civilian and military components of the Pakistan government, turned the tables. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif took only casual note of an operation planned on the defence side in the Kargil sector in Kashmir, which called for allowing Mujahideen to cross the Line of Control to occupy certain heights. This was expected to provide leverage for settling the Siachen issue. The plan resulted in a major military clash between India and Pakistan, that threatened to escalate to all-out war, but for the good offices of US President Clinton as a result of which the forces on both sides withdrew to their sides of the Line of Control.

As elections were pending in India, the BJP took full advantage of what was viewed as bad faith on the part of Pakistan. Bilateral relations deteriorated sharply, and it took another two years before the dialogue was resumed. In May 2001, Mr Vajpayee invited President Musharraf to Agra in July 2001. This time, a nine-point document was agreed between the two sides, but the hardliners in the Indian cabinet vetoed it.

The terrorist outrage of September 11, 2001 changed everything, as the US declared war on terror, with the Taliban-held Afghanistan as the first target. The role of Pakistan was crucial and as any response other than yes would have been considered as support to terrorism, President Musharraf decided to join the anti-terrorist coalition. India had hoped to profit from the war on terrorism since Pakistan had been the main backer of the Taliban regime. India staged some incidents to get Pakistan branded as terrorist, and after the alleged terrorist

Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee in Islamabad on January 6, 2004. The Indian foreign secretary Shashank referred, on his arrival in Islamabad, to the "comprehensive" document prepared by them on the basis of the agreement reached by the two leaders. The credit for the success of the first round is also being given to the political will and thrust of the leadership that led the participants to agree to a "roadmap" of negotiations to follow.

The main components of the roadmap are a meeting between the foreign secretaries in May or June this year to take up the issues of peace and security, including CBMs and Jammu and Kashmir. These are the two top issues in the agreed agenda. The talks on the remaining six items, covering Siachen, Wular Barrage/ Tulbul Navigation Project, Sir Creek, terrorism and drug-trafficking, economic and commercial cooperation, and promotion of friendly exchanges would be taken up at the technical level in July. The heads of the border security forces would meet in April, while nuclear CBMs will be taken up at the expert level in May. Bodies dealing with drugs and smuggling would meet in June. A meeting of foreign ministers is planned in August, to be preceded by a meeting of foreign secretaries.

Both foreign secretaries, in briefing the press, were cognizant of the fact that the Islamabad meeting had shown limited results. Mr. Riaz Khokhar urged that this should not breed pessimism. From the very beginning, both sides have stressed the need to proceed cautiously, and step by step, in order to achieve "a peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides".

We can derive satisfaction from the fact that the first round of what will be a prolonged and structured dialogue, has got off to a promising start. The people on both sides of the border are ready for peace, and look to the leadership to demonstrate the vision and statesmanship to lead this region to prosperity and peace.

*The writer is a former ambassador of Pakistan.*