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Pakistan-India talks: so far so good *

So far so good. The two nuclear-armed countries, in a near-war and subsequently a cold war situation until ten months ago are now tracking ways of constructive engagement. Solutions to complex problems and hard-lined are some way off but concrete decisions on the way forward on the dialogue have been made. The modest yet important objective of finalising modalities for the Pakistan-India composite dialogue has been achieved during the February 16-18 Islamabad talks. The two countries are now 'past-the-post' of the somewhat tenuous phase of 'talks for talks' agreed upon in the January 6 statement. Only five weeks after the commitment made in the January 6 statements for revival of the composite dialogue, the two governments have agreed on the content, level and time-frame-work for the dialogue. Dialogue on Kashmir and Peace and Security will begin by early April. Under the rubric of Peace and Security furthering strengthening of nuclear CBMs in line with the LOU signed at Lahore. Issues of concern like induction and deployment of ABMs will also be discussed. Discussion on a Strategic Restraint Regime will also take place to reduce risks of accidents.

Also the 'additionality' factor at the Islamabad talks has been an agreement to add new CBMs to a rapidly increasing CBM list. These include revival of the inter-ministerial Drug Committee between Pakistan and India which was established in 1994 and was disrupted in 1998. Similarly there will also be resumption of meetings between the senior officials of the Pakistan Rangers and the BSF. This discontinued after Kargil. Ways to strengthen the existing weekly contact between the Director-General will also be explored.

This is the fourth round of Pakistan-India talks that has been finalised to settle disputes. The first round of talks took place during 1962 and 1963. These foreign minister level talks between Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sardar Swaran Singh were held against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian Border dispute. The Anglo-American facilitation led to six rounds of talks. They ended unsuccessfully because India wanted the ceasefire line to become a permanent border while Islamabad wanted the Valley and Kashmiri speaking areas of Jammu to become part of Pakistan.

The second round between foreign secretary Sheharyar and his Indian counterpart also drew a blank. The third round between Shamshad and Salman Haider and Ragunath did yield positive results. Indeed it led to the



Nasim Zehra

The writer is an Islamabad-based security analyst, is a fellow of the Harvard University Asia Center
nasimzehra@hotmail.com

hitherto 'high point' of Pakistan-India relations, the Lahore summit. This fourth round of dialogue will begin against the many dark shadows that have hovered over the relations since 1999. Yet the potential for these talks to actually deliver will depend on the political leadership and the establishment of the two sides.

Since the January 6 public thaw and the November 2003 behind-the-scenes thaw it

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appears that two individuals, Vajpayee and Musharraf are keen to take the dialogue process forward. Vajpayee has shown by dictating 'quiet' to his men on Pakistan's embarrassing proliferation issue and commanding a 'go ahead' on the much awaited cricket match series that, he will allow no sabotage from within of the dialogue process. In Pakistan there has been only goodwill for the process.

The context setting for both the 1997 and the 2004 composite dialogues was leadership commitment, Nawaz Sharif and I K Gujral in 1997 and Musharraf and Vajpayee in 2004. In 1997 the actual dialogue preparations went through two stages. Then for the dia-

logue in the first round a Joint Statement issued by the Foreign Secretaries Shamshad Ahmad and Salman Haider at Islamabad on June 23 1997 first outlined the eight "outstanding issues of concerns" and decided to set up "mechanisms and working groups to address these issues in an integrated manner." Later on September 23, 1997 another Joint Statement was issued by Shamshad Ahmad and K Ragunath laying down the content, level, dates and location for the talks.

Significantly this one-sitting preparation of the 2004 composite talks at a time when the two countries have gone through unprecedented 'lows' in their relations, ranging from mini-wars in 1999 to near wars in 2002 and subsequent cold war till mid 2003, indicates that behind the scene official dialogue has paid dividends.

Other factors pushing the dialogue forward include the realisation in both countries that with resolving the K issue and simultaneously improving relations between the two countries no sustainable peace and cooperation is possible. Also the 'close call' in May 2002 when two nuclear powers almost headed towards war, has ensured that the international community 'lead' the two towards the dialogue table. Solutions to the issues including Kashmir will indeed have to be homegrown. Together Vajpayee and Musharraf appear to demonstrate that they both recognise the limits to their pre-April 2003 Kashmir strategy. On the ground neither country's Kashmir policy has worked. Hence now to sincere dialogue.

Clearly the prospects for peace are encouraging yet substantive progress will require genuine commitment by both sides to seek progress on the Kashmir dispute. Kashmir must be an integral part of the peace process. CBMs alone will not lead to trust-building or to expanding of options for solving Kashmir in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmir people. The real test of what the composite dialogue can actually deliver is still to come. Meanwhile India and Pakistan will need to coordinate closer on the Kashmir policy. As a starter they must allow Kashmiris from across the LoC to meet. State violence against the freedom fighters too must be reduced; a fact clearly articulated during the Islamabad talks. It will take a visionary and iron-willed Vajpayee to convince the Indian establishment that any attempt to be 'clear-by-half' on the critical issue of Kashmir will abort a peace process which has great potential to move the two countries towards constructive cooperation.