

Prospects of Indo-Pak talks

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By formally reviving the composite dialogue around six-plus-two format, Pakistan and India have not in fact started from where they had left in 1997 that should not have been derailed in the first place. Before last week's foreign secretaries' talks, much more had either been agreed to or conceded at the summit level interaction between President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to clear the road for a meaningful dialogue. Most important thing is that a structured process of negotiations has been revived with a specific starting-time for each issue and area. What are prospects of this Indo-Pak dialogue?

There are some additional and, in some exceptional ways, new-imperatives that inform this round of dialogue between the two countries: One, after the Lahore process was derailed and Agra summit failed to revive the negotiations, the leadership in both countries took a longer time in reconciling with the need to revive the dialogue process. After a crucial shift in geo-strategic realities in the wake of 9/11, the national security establishment in Pakistan took almost three years in reconciling its corporate interests to and adjusting with the new strategic imperatives. Failing to win support for the ongoing militancy in Kashmir and draw a line between the 'Kashmiri liberation fighters' and the 'internationalist Islamic terrorists', the security establishment was left with no option but to carefully wrap up the militancy engaged on the Kashmir front.

Thanks to the bellicosity of Indians, who refused to be browbeaten, it tried its best to unsuccessfully wean away the militants engaged on Kashmir front, except for indigenous Hezbul Mujahideen and some other elements, from their ideological counterparts elsewhere. When most militants refused to budge from their ideological stand and even turned their guns against Islamabad, General Musharraf in particular, the time of reckoning had come and the national security establishment had to change its course. Since these militants now posed a greater threat, the military establishment decided to complete the process of distancing from the militant outfits whom it had formally banned earlier- thus removing the biggest stumbling block of 'cross-border infiltration' in the way of reviving negotiations.

Two, after a longest military standoff and employment of what is described as 'coercive diplomacy', Indian leadership realized the fruitlessness of its punitive measures and dangers of a much tempted 'limited war' escalating into a full-fledged and nuclear war. Retreating twice from the brink of war, it had to give weight to the peace option that Mr Vajpayee finally announced in his famous April speech in Kashmir. Three, backdoor channel, rejected by General Musharraf and preferred by Mr Vajpayee, was finally opened in May last year when Mr Brajesh Mishra, Vajpayee's trusted national security advisor, and Mr Tariq

Aziz, a very close aide to General Musharraf and secretary general of yet to be formed National Security Council, met. While earlier efforts at reviving top level back channel had failed, Mishra-Aziz duo seemed to have made a real difference in bringing the two leaders closer.

Four, there was a groundswell in favours of peace among the civil societies across borders who helped build confidence and overcome resistance to normalization prevalent among the two establishments. Five, exhausting its *Hindutva* card in Gujarat; the BJP desperately needed a new image that Mr Vajpayee provided by offering a hand of friendship to Pakistan. Besides a 'good-feel factor' created by good economic growth, the peace issue can now help capture the differential that is crucial to victory in the coming general elections. Six, overwhelmed by international pressures on more than three strategic counts, it was time for Pakistani establishment to release the pressure while making adjustments in nationals' security paradigm to preserve vital national interests.

Seven, quite importantly although not decisively, the international community, above all the US, was too keen to focus on the war against terrorism in crucial phases in Afghanistan and not let Indo-Pak conflict spin out of proportions. The US and European Union have been too much involved in conflict management. The Bush administration, at least on two occasions, persuaded India from crossing the brink. It continued to play the role of a facilitator, although New Delhi has remained averse to third party mediation. Eight, unlike past, there are no major political spoilers in both countries who could derail the process, as it happened during the Lahore process. Strength of the current peace process is that it is being led by those who are the real hardliners- the army leadership in Pakistan and Hindu nationalist leadership in India- while opponents of peace re on the retreat amid an upsurge for peace among the people.

Nine, and quite significantly, the actual negotiations at the official level have been preceded by dozens of confidence building measures and, to top it all, a successful summit meeting between the two top leaders that produced a breakthrough statement that addressed the core concerns of the two sides: India's concern about 'cross-border infiltration' and Pakistan's concern for the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Ten, what has made this round of dialogue more promising is that the two sides have shown a good measure of flexibility that has made a daunting job of negotiators easy, if not easier. Whereas India did not insist upon complete cessation of cross-border infiltration, although it would like to see it come to a complete end before the talks at political level starts, Pakistan is no more making progress in all other areas a hostage to a breakthrough on what it describes at its core issue- Kashmir. The ceasefire is holding and visible progress is taking place in other areas, including possibilities of trade and people to people contacts.

Now the question is: What are the prospects of these talks? Indeed there are areas that can be decided in weeks, if not months, such as Siachin, Wullar Barrage and Sir Creek. All impediments to people to people contacts can be ironed out in weeks as well. Similarly, on trade, tourism and joint ventures both countries, in collaboration with the private sector, can take strides in months, if not years, although streamlining of tariffs, para-tariffs, customs and monetary policies will take a longer time. There is a greater need to form joint groups of experts to propose reforms that will facilitate a mutually beneficial trade, tourism and investment. What is not understandable is that as to why India is holding back its consent to trans-gas pipeline project from Iran and Pakistan is delaying the Most Favoured Nation Status to India, despite having signed the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA).

Most thorny security issues can also be tackled smoothly in an agreed framework of the security of the subcontinent. With sights on a South Asian customs, economic and monetary union and softening of borders for trade, tourism and cooperation, both India and Pakistan should evolve a collective security system that includes a nuclear strategic stabilization regime, brings a measure of balance in asymmetry of conventional weapons and ultimately facilitates an end to the arms race. On Kashmir, although a final settlement may not be that easy to achieve in the short term, the disputed region can be demilitarised facilitating greater interaction among the people of Kashmir across the LoC that should be softened in the meanwhile. In the greater interest of amity in South Asia, the issue of Kashmir can also be solved to the satisfaction of all three parties to the dispute, especially the Kashmiris.

This is a good news that the two foreign ministers will be meeting to take stock of the progress made, this is the top political leadership that can finally take a decision on the most dividing issue while taking their respective nations into confidence. Best course would be that the two leaders are allowed to decide it, and best time for it may be before General Musharraf retires from the army and after Mr Vajpayee gets a mandate on peace with Pakistan, or the two nations allow the Kashmir dispute to be diffused to be settled by the Kashmir themselves over a period of time. Indeed solution to the Kashmir issue is an imperative for a stable peace; it cannot be a pre-condition but an outcome of the peace process that has to be consolidated. Hopes will have to be built, but patience will have to precede a solution that will not be easy and may not come soon. A possible delay in its solution, and that is probable and understandable, must not in any way derail the peace process that can provide a sound basis for a solution that doesn't heart.

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