

Back to back talks!

"We desire to live in a neighbourhood of peace and prosperity. We will actively pursue the composite dialogue with Pakistan. We are sincere about discussing and resolving all issues, including Jammu and Kashmir. We recognise that resolution of major issues requires national consensus and accommodation of public sentiment in both countries." — **Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh**

As things are settling down after the assumption of power by the Congress led government in Delhi, momentum in Indo-Pak normalisation talks is also growing. The holding of recent talks on nuclear confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan, followed by meetings between the Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers in China, indicates the readiness on the part of two erstwhile neighbours to follow the incremental approach in resolving contentious issues. The foreign secretaries' talks held between India and Pakistan in New Delhi on June 26-27 covered the areas of peace and security, including Jammu and Kashmir and it is hoped that the two sides would keep the channels of negotiations open, to reduce the level of tension and confrontation.

The most important thing, which India and Pakistan must take into account after the Delhi talks, is the creation of a favourable climate for talks. Unfortunately, the two sides are not able to live like normal neighbours since quite long and the abnormality in their relations is quite obvious in two things: travel and trade. In terms of building confidence and trust between two neighbours who have fought three and a half wars and have a history of confrontation, it is very essential that in order to move in the direction of normal ties, they should lift restrictions on the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. Contentious issues, matter but in order to create conditions for normal relations, both sides have a long way to go.

One positive thing, which has recently taken place in formal and informal talks held between India and Pakistan, is the agreement "in principle" to reopen their consulates in Karachi and Mumbai and to restore the strength of their respective high commissions to 110, which was cut to half after the attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. That informal agreement was reached during talks between the Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri on the sidelines of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue meeting in the Chinese city of Qingdao. But such an informal agreement is nothing new because the two sides have in the past also agreed in principle to reopen their consulates in Karachi and Mumbai but couldn't move beyond that agreement in principle. What is required is the implementation of that agreement, so that hundreds of thousands of people from India and Pakistan, who have to pass through the process of human suffering to seek visas from Islamabad and Delhi, are given a relief and they are saved from travelling from far flung areas to the capitals of India and Pakistan. Similarly, it is true for launching the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad Bus Service, so that thousands of divided families along the Line of Control are able to interact with each other and their sufferings are also



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reduced. As far as trade is concerned, it is equally important, like travel for building trust and confidence at various levels.

The dynamics of back-to-back talks between India and Pakistan needs to be understood in the dichotomy for a sustained process of negotiations and the changed international situation. After decades of confrontation and abnormal relations, there is an element of embarrassment and shame in New Delhi and Islamabad that because of non-cooperation and tension the two countries are behind key areas of human development. The end of the cold war at the superpower level resulted into the resolution of old conflicts but Indo-Pak relations remained unaffected despite change at the international level. The worst part in their relations was from the failure of the Agra summit in July 2001 till April 2003. Since then one can see the gradual normalisation of Indo-Pak relations starting from the resumption of road, air and train links, restoration of full diplomatic relations, telephonic conversation and face to face talks between the leadership of the two countries. The resumption of cricket matches and the visit of various delegations ranging from trade, cultural and parliamentarians contributed to induct some segment of normalcy in their relations. Against this background, does it mean that back-to-back talks between India and Pakistan on a wide range of issues would lead to some meaningful breakthrough in their abnormal relations, and provide an opportunity for the more than one billion people of the two countries to live a peaceful and honourable life?

Four factors are influential in back-to-back talks, which are going on between India and Pakistan. First, the element of seriousness and sincerity is the key for the success of talks, whether held at the junior, middle or senior levels. Both countries are claiming that the situation is ripe for a breakthrough in Indo-Pak ties and both are serious and sincere in their homework and intentions. But past experience shows that as long as vested interests are allowed to impede the progress achieved in their talks, the result is totally negative. During the second tenure of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, foreign secretaries talks were held on discussing contentious issues but got bogged down because the two sides were unable to resist vested interests. In Agra also, the vested interests managed to wreck the possible agreement, which was reached between Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It is now an open secret what the vested interests were and how those forces that wanted to prevent these talks to succeed, were able to prevail over the forces of moderation. Therefore, for the success of the present back-to-back talks between India and Pakistan, it is imperative that the parties involved should have a capacity to resist the forces of evil and darkness and move ahead with the plan to resolve high, medium and low level conflicts. Second, a lot of work has been done at the track-I, track-II and track-

III levels on military and non-military confidence building measures. Since early 1990s, dozens of peace initiatives led to the unfolding of several plans to normalise travel, trade, cultural, security, water and territorial conflicts between India and Pakistan. The foreign ministries of India and Pakistan must have enormous ideas, plans and proposals prepared by different individuals, groups and organisations both in the region and outside, for the full normalisation of relations between the two countries. All such ideas, plans and proposals must have been studied by the governments of India and Pakistan, and the most plausible and workable options for bettering their relations must be seriously examined and implemented. The present governments of India and Pakistan are fortunate to engage themselves in back-to-back talks when they have some very bright ideas, plans and proposals for resolving the conflicts. What is required is to pursue such talks in the light of things, which could ensure a workable and respectable solution of issues, which tend to make the lives of people of India and Pakistan miserable.

Third, back-to-back talks must avoid media hype so that various circles do not draw unnecessary expectations or wrong conclusions. In the past also, some of the talks held between India and Pakistan couldn't render positive results because of unnecessary media publicity. Once things settle down and a consensus is reached on various issues, then there is no harm to provide the required information to the media. But while the talks are going on, the two sides must avoid revealing the details of things which they have discussed so far or will discuss in the future course of talks. Finally, the success of back-to-back talks also requires that the momentum created as a result of the talk process must continue. If there is a stalemate in talks, then it must be removed without a failure of time so that unnecessary time is not wasted in sorting out things.

The challenge of back-to-back talks at the Indo-Pak level is critical because there are forces that on account of threat to their survival desperately want a failure or stalemate in the normalisation process of the two countries. It is a positive sign that so far the momentum in Indo-Pak talks, which was created after the visit of the former Indian Prime Minister Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Islamabad on the occasion of SAARC summit, has not been broken. Delhi talks at the foreign secretaries' level have created favourable ground for further negotiations but for the success of the normalisation process, it is essential that there is political stability in Pakistan and recent change in Islamabad is not able to cast a negative shadow on the dynamics of talks.

The ultimate success of these talks depends on how the two sides follow the principles of trust, fairness, give and take and magnanimity during the course of talks and to what extent the leadership of the two sides is able to neutralise opposition to a final agreement. All in all, what do the people at the helm of affairs in New Delhi and Islamabad agree upon, must be shared by the majority of people of their countries? Otherwise, the forces of evil and darkness that have succeeded in bridging a wide gulf between the people of India and Pakistan, will manage to maintain the environment of hatred, mistrust and tension.