

Moving ahead, carefully

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Pak. F. Relations - India
Dawar 12.6.04
WELL-WISHERS of Pakistan-India amity have been disconcerted by the rhetoric as well as the substance of the pronouncements of the redoubtable Mr Natwar Singh, the minister for external affairs in the Manmohan Singh coalition government.

It was rather extraordinary that a man of his wisdom, experience and culture should have chosen to begin his tenure by conducting diplomacy through the medium of the press, and that too on a highly sensitive subject like India-Pakistan relations.

His choice as the new manager of India's foreign policy in a Congress-led government at the centre was never in doubt. Insightful observers also knew that, being a loyalist and a confidant of Sonia Gandhi, the diplomat-turned politician, who has long been regarded as a Pakistan expert by his party leaders, would be able to run his ministry almost unhindered. If there were any doubts, Mr Natwar Singh has been quick to remove them. In a recent interview published in *India Today*, he observed: "The previous government had taken foreign policy from the ministry of external affairs to the prime minister's office. That will not be done any longer. India is a changed place."

The first thing that India's scholarly foreign minister, who used to review books in his spare time before joining the cabinet, has made clear is that there will be no quick-fix solution to the 57-year old Kashmir dispute. He then went on to add that he was prepared to play the waiting game because "we can sit it out. I don't think Pakistan can sit it out indefinitely."

In the same interview to *Outlook* (June 7, 2004), Mr. Natwar Singh stated that "there is no doubt the Americans have influenced Pakistan with regard to having a dialogue with India, and persuaded General Musharraf to be more realistic when dealing with India." He, however, criticized the Americans for granting "major non-Nato ally" status to Pakistan "without even consulting India."

The big brotherly attitude came in the open when, in an *India-Today* interview, Mr Natwar Singh exulted: "When I meet Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri in August, I will ask them when they plan to stop their terrorism programme. Most terrorism in India comes from across the border, though Pakistan's policy of bleeding India has not worked."

But the most contentious observation of the Indian foreign minister related to the Simla Agreement which he described as "the bedrock" on which ties between the two neighbours are to be constructed. It is interesting to note that Mr Natwar Singh, when asked whether he agreed with the Islamabad Declaration of January 6, did not directly answer a straight-forward question. His line of argument was that it was only the Simla Agreement, signed in 1972, which had ensured peace till 1999. But four months after the Lahore Declaration came Kargil, and though he did not say it in so many words he implied that a similar fate could await the Lahore Declaration.

There are primarily two reasons why all Congress governments have been laying

emphasis on the Simla Agreement rather than other subsequent accords. Firstly they want to remind Pakistan of its humiliating defeat at the hands of India in December 1971 when 909,000 of its defence forces were in India's hands as prisoners. At Simla, the accord was between the victor and the vanquished. The second reason pertains to the arbitrary and unjustified interpretation being put forward by India that through the Simla accord, Pakistan had agreed to accept the Line of Control as the final border in Jammu and Kashmir. The insertion of words in the Simla Agreement, at the sagacious insistence of Mr Bhutto, "without prejudice to the recognized position" belies the Indian claim. This also partly explains why Mr Natwar Singh is so allergic to the Islamabad Declaration because it states that the resolution of all disputes between India and

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Pakistan, including Jammu and Kashmir, will be "to the satisfaction of both sides."

It is to the credit of Mr Natwar Singh that after Islamabad reacted strongly to his observations, he was quick to control the damage by explanations and clarifications. His foreign secretary went to great lengths to explain that besides the Simla Agreement, India would abide by all subsequent accords and declarations, including the Islamabad Declaration. The president of India, in his traditional address to the joint sitting of the Indian parliament on June 6, clarified that peace talks with Pakistan would be held within the framework of the 1972 Simla Agreement and all subsequent pacts agreed to by the Vajpayee government.

In another balancing act, Mr Natwar Singh has announced that his country was willing to consider the gas pipeline proposal from Iran to India via Pakistan if Islamabad provided guarantees of international security. It is a little intriguing why an experienced diplomat like Mr Singh thought it fit to make an important policy announcement, which constitutes a change in the hitherto Indian position on the gas line proposal from Iran, through the medium of the press when he could have used it as an effective leverage in the forthcoming talks with Pakistan.

It is also not yet clear whether Mr Singh made the gas pipeline offer to Pakistan after getting the approval of the Indian ministry of petroleum which has a decisive say in such matters. Incidentally, the petroleum ministry is now being headed by Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar, another experienced Indian diplomat-turned politician. It is quite well-known that there has been strong opposition from the Indian bureaucratic and political sectors to the transportation of Iranian gas to India through Pakistani territory which, if implemented, may transform the geopolitics of the entire region.

Mr Natwar Singh is likely to visit Pakistan

in July after the foreign secretaries' meeting in the last week of June and ahead of Mr Kasuri's meeting with him in August. This is a bold move on the part of Indian foreign minister to ostensibly allay Pakistani fears and misgivings and should be warmly welcomed by Islamabad. The need of the hour is to repair the damage and to restore a milieu of trust and confidence between the two sides created after Mr Vajpayee's Islamabad visit in January. It is very important that the present atmosphere of hope and goodwill on both sides of the border is sustained by sincere and determined efforts. If New Delhi and Islamabad fail to do that, Indo-Pakistan relations will soon be back to square one.

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that it is time to resolve bilateral disputes and concentrate on building dimensions of peace and cooperation in South Asia. Happily, despite its long and bitter history, Indo-Pakistan hostility is not visible in personal contacts and relations between Pakistanis and Indians in the same way as it is, for instance, between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Indo-Pakistan relations have a history of moving from crisis to detente and them back again. The two countries have been so suspicious and mistrustful of each other that even when they reach agree-

ments — that, of course, happens very rarely — the provisions of this are interpreted differently by them to an extent that the agreement itself dies in the process. For instance, 14 years ago, the defence secretaries of India and Pakistan were able to hammer out an agreement on Siachen, but different interpretations of the agreement strangled it.

There are powerful forces in both the countries who are opposed to the resolution of differences and want to keep the pot simmering, if not boiling. The danger is that, as in the past, when the two sides start negotiations and some progress is under way, one or the other may conclude that the risks of moving ahead are greater than the costs of breaking off discussions. The following steps are suggested to further the peace process:

(a) After the change of government in New Delhi, it is imperative to stay the course, avoid diplomacy through the media and maintain the momentum of goodwill and trust left by the Vajpayee government. (b) It will help if Kashmir is also regarded by both sides as a human rights issue and not merely as one of territory or international law.

(c) Both sides must understand that no Kashmir solution will be durable unless it is acceptable to the people of the state.

(d) In the forthcoming composite dialogue, it will not be possible to proceed on all issues with the same pace because some issues are less complex than others. But it is important that a sincere effort is made to move on all issues if the dialogue is not to come to a premature halt.

(e) The forthcoming nuclear CBM talks, ahead of the foreign secretaries' meeting, can provide an excellent opportunity to break the ice and move forward.

(f) Both sides must be ready for the long haul, absorb the occasional setbacks and stay the course.

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