

Architecture for peace

By Talat Masood

Pak. F. Belal - India
Dawn 7.4.07

INITIAL statements made by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi are very positive. They indicate that the direction and tone set by the Islamabad declaration during the Saarc summit in January 2004 is likely to be maintained. This gives reason for hope that if practical steps are taken to strengthen cooperation at all levels between India and Pakistan, they could transform their bipolar rivalry into a mutually cooperative relationship.

The challenge is to anchor the India-Pakistan dialogue in a solid and stable framework that could lead the two countries towards the resolution of issues, particularly Kashmir, in a just and equitable manner. The forthcoming secretary-level talks should determine the framework of negotiations, the range and prioritization of different items. A multi-track agenda containing positive elements of previous agreements, meetings and summits, particularly those included in the Lahore Declaration and the 1997 MoU agreed between

violent resistance and allow the peace process to move towards a political solution. A verification mechanism has to be introduced to ensure the reduction of forces and the prevention of human rights abuses on the Indian side and cross-border movement of insurgents from Pakistan.

One possibility might be to use the UN or neutral observers or joint teams comprising Indian and Pakistani members for this purpose. By granting access to observers from human rights organizations, India will help in easing the tension. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which gives unlimited powers to the Indian army and the police personnel to summarily arrest, detain indefinitely and interrogate anyone suspected of complicity with, or sympathy for, the

then political process degenerates into a proxy power game hurting the real interests of the Kashmiris.

Opening the direct Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road link, and subsequently, connecting a few more cities of the two parts of Kashmir, easing visa restrictions and softening the borders will provide a fillip to the peace process. If Kashmiris are allowed to interact, they can also work out what is in their best interest.

Until the recent announcement of a ceasefire, there were no restrictions on military activity in the Siachen area. Troops on both sides suffer heavy casualties mostly because of treacherous weather conditions and accidents. India and Pakistan had twice come close to finding a solution to the Siachen dispute

but had to set this aside for political reasons. This exercise needs to be reactivated. Similarly, it would be prudent to seriously address the issues of Sir Creek and Wullar Barrage. Sir Creek has given rise to friction between India and Pakistan on matters of territory and limits of economic zones.

Both countries continue to arrest each other's fishermen on charges of "trespassing territorial waters" and subject them to the hardships of long detention.

The challenge before Pakistan and India is to anchor the peace dialogue in a solid and stable framework, so that the two countries can move towards the resolution of all issues. The forthcoming secretary-level talks should determine this framework of negotiations and prioritize the different issues at stake.

those declared in the Lahore Declaration and the 1997 MoU agreed between the secretaries of the two

countries, could be a good beginning. It is encouraging that both sides recognize the need for an all-inclusive agenda. However, it may not be possible to make progress on all major issues. From the Pakistani perspective, if there is no discernible progress on Kashmir, and from an Indian viewpoint, if the issue of cross-border infiltration is not resolved, the process could be derailed.

The engagement should be sustained and substantive and avoid media hype. Deliberate efforts should be made to educate public opinion on the imperative for normalization of relations and to prepare it for the reality that a possible solution of Kashmir will require considerable flexibility and understanding.

For sustaining the negotiating process, both countries will have to give due attention to ensuring that the ceasefire holds. They should evolve a regime for border management that minimizes the chances of conflict. Periodic meetings between the opposing force commanders and close contact between the DGMOs have facilitated in stabilizing the LoC and should continue in the same spirit of understanding. Serious consideration should be given to pulling back artillery and mortars beyond the firing range of either side to give confidence to the civilians to resume their normal lives. An agreement on further pullback of deployed forces from existing positions, with a firm undertaking that there will be no forward movement will be another useful confidence-building measure (CBM). The two sides could determine certain areas as no-deployment zones, and agree on limiting forces in areas that are prone to conflict. Both sides could also agree to employing electronic and aerial surveillance devices in certain selected sectors as part of a cooperative approach to border management.

As Pakistan has made sincere efforts to curb cross-border intrusions, India has to reciprocate by substantially reducing its military and paramilitary forces in Kashmir, which, according to some estimates, is in the range of 600,000. Reduction of armed forces in Kashmir and an improved human rights situation there should lower the compulsion for

the different issues at stake.

Kashmiri freedom fighters has to be reviewed.

Similarly, an understanding for establishing a viable mechanism to monitor cross-border movement of activists should help relieve India's concern on this score. The attrition caused by the Indian security forces as well as the Mujahideen is taking a heavy toll on the people of Kashmir, without clear military or political gains for either side. Progress on finding a solution would depend on the extent of flexibility that New Delhi and Islamabad are prepared to show, and whether the two sides realize the importance of the collective good of the region and the long-term benefits of a rapprochement.

Several proposals about Kashmir have remained the subject of discussion by various think-tanks and policy experts, but the governments have never formally addressed them at a bilateral level. Among those that have been widely discussed are a plebiscite under UN auspices, conversion of the LoC into the international border, independence of the whole or part of Kashmir, and division on the basis of religious or geographical lines. Once the peace process moves forward, the two sides should examine these proposals and look at their feasibility or, alternatively, come up with new ideas aimed at resolving the conflict.

Events have shown that two years after the state elections in Kashmir, the Saeed government has failed to normalize the situation in the state. Violence, including attacks by insurgents on military targets and repression by Indian security forces, continue unabated.

For durable peace to be established, New Delhi will have to involve the APHC and its militant groups in any future dialogue. India's policy of putting pressure on the APHC to factionalize it would prove counter-productive. Islamabad, too, should not take sides with any of the factional groups of APHC so that internal political dynamics can take their normal course and produce a genuine leadership.

When India and Pakistan support favourites among the Kashmiri groups

passing territorial waters" and subject them to the hardships of long detention.

The delineation of the Sir Creek will have to address the problem of the land border, the boundary within the creek and the maritime boundary between the two countries. The Wullar Barrage construction was unilaterally undertaken by India in the disputed Kashmir area.

Pakistan's objection is that it contravenes the Indus Water Treaty and will reduce the flow of water, adversely impacting on the capacity of dams and the generation of hydropower. Given sufficient political resolve, the resolution of all these issues should be possible, or else the two sides could agree to international arbitration.

Keeping the hard-liners in both countries under control would be necessary. The development of strong peace constituencies of businessmen, politicians, intellectuals, and other segments of society should neutralize their influence. An encouraging development is that religious political leaders are showing an interest in Indo-Pakistan reconciliation. The main opposition parties in the two countries need to be kept involved, as their support for developing a national consensus on major issues particularly Kashmir, is essential. Mr Vajpayee had taken certain bold initiatives on bilateral relations and it is hoped that the BJP will continue to remain supportive of this trend.

While the US presence has increased significantly in South Asia as a consequence of the events of 9/11, its current preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan and the forthcoming presidential elections are likely to prevent it from devoting any serious attention to the region apart from encouraging peace dialogue between the two countries.

Washington also realizes the limits of its leverage as former United States Deputy Under Secretary Strobe Talbott once aptly stated: "No amount of diplomatic exertion on our part — on nonproliferation or any other subject — will have much effect unless and until India and Pakistan liberate themselves from their own enmity."

The writer is a retired Lt-General of the Pakistan Army.