

Keeping balance in the dialogue

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FOLLOWING the Saarc foreign ministers' meeting in Islamabad, during which the Indian foreign minister also met the top leadership, the composite dialogue process has picked up momentum, and meetings are being held on various issues in New Delhi and Islamabad. The foreign secretaries had met earlier, and the foreign ministers will meet on September 5-6, 2004.

The meeting on the Wullar Barrage could not reach agreement, reflecting how delicate water issues remain. One should not expect breakthroughs on other matters during the initial meetings at which both sides would be inclined to state their known positions. Some concrete steps can be taken quickly, to signify progress, such as restoring the rail link between Sindh and Rajasthan.

The resumption of the dialogue is by itself a significant development, and there can be no doubt about the strength of popular sentiment on both sides to move forward. However, one should not underestimate the effect of over 50 years of confrontation, which have bred mistrust. India had tried coercion for 10 months, from December 2001 to October 2002, and was persuaded to respond positively to the repeated calls for dialogue by Pakistan.

It would be wrong to assume that there are

attack has restored Pakistan's relevance to US concerns, and Washington is anxious to promote a detente between the two South Asian rivals, the stance of the US is not really balanced. This is partly because of the overall recognition of India as the emerging economic and political power in the region, and partly because of the view held by Israel that Pakistan's nuclear capability constitutes a long-term threat. Our internal divisions and vulnerabilities also present a contrast to the stable democratic institutions in India that appear favourable for take-off by that country in the near future.

With poverty and deprivation posing the main challenge to our people, many believe the time has come to get our priorities

India, while willing to activate Saarc owing to the interest of the smaller members, is less keen to see it play a leading role in regional cooperation, as it continues to seek a major role for itself.

Energy is one area where progress is likely, and Pakistan, which chairs the energy committee, may have greater success, in integrating the electrical grids and tapping extra-regional resources.

The Indians have shown cautious interest in the gas pipeline from Iran through Pakistan. Indeed, such will be the growth in demand for energy as India develops, that other pipeline projects, such as the one from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan may also be encouraged.

The bilateral dialogue is being pursued on the basis of the composite eight-point agenda agreed on in 1997. The opening meetings on each item are bound to witness a reiteration of the national stance, but some token advances may take place.

There is already some move to liberalize visas, and the reopening of consulates-general in Karachi and Bombay has been agreed. Whether the former residence of Quaid-e-Azam in Mumbai will be made available looks doubtful, with Shiv Sena's Bal Thackray still commanding considerable clout in the city. Progress on major issues such as peace and security was recorded when the foreign secretaries met in New Delhi in June. The agreements like advance intimation of missile tests show a movement forward, and India has also

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any other factors, besides the failure of coercion, that would compel India to make major concessions on key issues, notably that of Kashmir.

The process of rapprochement is going on at two levels, multilateral, through Saarc, and bilateral, through the resumed composite dialogue. While a breakthrough was achieved in January this year, following the Musharraf-Vajpayee meeting after the Saarc summit in Islamabad, in the shape of a decision to start a new phase of relationship, the defeat of BJP-led NDA in India's general elections brought unexpected changes.

Mr Vajpayee, though the leader of a Hindu extremist coalition, appeared to have a personal stake in ushering in a new era of friendship. This unexpected development has produced a situation in which chances of quick progress in the dialogue have been reduced. The Congress, which has led India for nearly 50 of its 50 year history, has a tradition of asserting India's leadership in the region.

While it talks the language of secularism and moderation, it has been more assertive of India's destined role as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean region. Pandit Nehru, who led the country for the first 17 years, visualized India as one of four great powers in the world, the others being the US, Russia and China.

He had sought to carve out a leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement, though, ultimately, India tied its chariot to the Soviet juggernaut. In the decisive proxy war between the superpowers in Afghanistan, the US felt obliged to revitalize the flagging alliance relationship with Pakistan.

After the end of the Cold War, with Islam viewed as the successor threat to communism, the US took a 180-degree turn, and identified India as its new strategic partner, particular as China began to emerge as a potential challenger of its hegemony.

Though the 9/11 terrorist

dream.

right, and to concentrate on economic development instead of maintaining the costly arms race with the emerging Great Power next door. China provides an outstanding example, whereby, without abandoning its principled position on Taiwan, it has concentrated on economic development over the past 25 years.

As we take up the composite dialogue item by item, there are already signs that India is not ready to make significant concessions on political issues, at least not in the opening rounds. As major issues, like peace, security and Kashmir come up, there might be some progress here and there, on matters such as nuclear CBMs, but India has already sought more time to take up the issue of Jammu and Kashmir seriously. Indeed, the sum total of progress made both on multilateral and bilateral issues leaves little doubt that the resumption of the dialogue does not imply a readiness to compromise, and that national perceptions and goals will remain uppermost.

Taking up the multilateral issues first, there has been progress, especially on trade issues through the agreement on Safta, and also on counter-terrorist cooperation. Differences have emerged, however, on the future expansion of Saarc. India is pushing for the inclusion of Afghanistan, since it hopes to acquire transit rights to Central Asia.

China has expressed interest in being associated with Saarc, which Pakistan would welcome but India may not. Smaller members want Saarc to have links with other regional groupings, but India does not favour this at present.

The Asian Cooperation Dialogue process has made progress through the meeting held in May in China, and the next meeting will be held in Pakistan. Here also, India is less than enthusiastic on inter-regional cooperation.

The overall impression is that

proposed other military CBMs.

However, India has pleaded for more time before taking up the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan favours the start of a negotiation process in which such matters as the role of Kashmiris, and measures to reduce violations of human rights can be taken up along with other modalities relating to President Musharraf's four-point plan, that seeks to cater to sensitivities of both sides.

The principle of simultaneity in progress on all items of the composite agenda remains important for Pakistan. However, realism demands that if progress is possible on some matters and is beneficial to both sides, then it should not be ruled out because the sides are moving more slowly on other items, notably Kashmir.

India is seeking to demonstrate some progress on Kashmir, by proposing that the bus service from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad be started and since there is a ceasefire along the Line of Control, trade across it and even tourism may be allowed.

The two countries could cooperate on environmental issues. However, the fact remains that the start of the dialogue has not ended the freedom struggle inside Kashmir and Indian repression has stepped up. An agreement to withdraw some of its forces by India should be a logical response to the commitment by Pakistan to prevent cross-border movement by militants, which has reduced greatly.

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