

Heading for a rough patch?

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For the first time since India and Pakistan broke the ice in January, a jarring tone is detectable in official statements about their bilateral dialogue. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh's visit to Islamabad only confirms that the euphoria and exuberance evident only weeks ago are yielding to anxiety and fear. Talks on the only confidence-building measure (CBM) on the table - a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad - are deadlocked.

If things don't improve before Singh and Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri meet on September 5-6, the entire dialogue process could unravel. To prevent this, the apex political leadership in both countries must give the process high priority and momentum. Pakistani leaders must amend their negative view of the Manmohan Singh government. And Singh must personally take charge of the process.

We cannot afford a failure of the first India-Pakistan comprehensive talks in over 30 years. This will mean losing a handsome peace dividend, and worse, resuming hostility in a bitter form. Failure is completely, categorically unacceptable - no matter which side is responsible for causing it.

By all informed accounts, Natwar Singh's exchanges in Pakistan produced no advance, no new understanding. India on July 24 voiced its "disappointment" over the "tone and substance" of Pakistan's comments about Singh's discussion with President Pervez Musharraf. It said the comment don't reflect the discussions' "comprehensive nature". It expressed discomfort with Musharraf's demand that "a final settlement" of Kashmir in accordance with "the legitimate aspirations of the Kashmiris" must be reached "within a reasonable timeframe".

Similarly, Musharraf declared an "endless" dialogue with India "neither wise nor desirable". He wants India to reciprocate Pakistan's "flexibility, sincerity, and courage", which he believes, is lacking.

Indian officials are strongly sceptical about the "timeframe" demand and Pakistan's emphasis on "legitimate [Kashmiri] aspirations", which they say sits ill with the fact that it hasn't allowed elected assemblies in the Northern Areas. Many Indian policy-makers are worried by Musharraf's recent speech: "while we are working both on dialogue and CBMs with India, Kashmir is the main dispute ... Until there is progress towards its resolution, there can be no headway on CBMs or other issues."

Whether or not this represents a major shift of stance - away from simultaneous movement on CBMs and the "2+6" issues, including Kashmir - it's clear that the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus is not around the corner. No other CBMs are likely. Pessimism seems to be crystallising among Islamabad's policy-makers.

From across the border, three factors appear to



Praful Bidwai

The writer is one of India's most widely published columnists. Formerly a Senior Fellow of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, he is a winner of the Sean MacBride Prize for 2000 of the International Peace Bureau. prafulbidwai1@yahoo.co.in

have influenced this. First, many Pakistanis feel uneasy about new government in India. They feel Manmohan Singh won't be as keen on peace, as was Vajpayee - a "tall leader", "a man of peace" uniquely committed to reconciliation with Pakistan. They have a negative perception of the Congress, which they associate with Partition, "soft-Hindutva", anti-Muslim violence, and a hard line on Kashmir.

This perception is largely mistaken. Vajpayee did invest energies in the dialogue. But just two years ago, he was talking of *aar-paar ki ladai* (battle to the finish) - as he mobilised 700,000 troops at the border. Besides, the BJP believes not in "soft-Hindutva", but hard-boiled, aggressive, *Islamophobic* communalism. This is integral to Vajpayee's politics. To depict Vajpayee as a "man of peace", while burdening Singh with all the baggage from the Congress's past is wrong.

Pakistanis would be wrong to read too much into Natwar Singh's early pronouncement that the dialogue would be conducted within the Shimla Agreement framework. The statement was unfortunate. But Singh has since admitted that India and Pakistan have gone beyond Shimla, even Lahore. In deference to Pakistani sensitivities, he didn't utter the S-word in Islamabad.

Second, Pakistani policy-makers prefer to deal with one authority/power-centre preferably one individual. Nobody fits that description in post-NDA India. Is Singh really in charge? Or is Sonia Gandhi? Who can take a high-level political decision? This view underestimates the strong Indian consensus on improving relations with Pakistan and the existence of multiple sources of decision-making in India's fairly institutionalised democracy.

Many Pakistanis regard Manmohan Singh a "technocrat", an administrator - not a politician who can take bold decisions on sensitive issues, where he might be vulnerable to the charge of "selling out" India's interests. This is unfair. It underestimates Singh's tenacity. Whatever one's view of his 1991 neo-liberal policy turn - and I admit to a largely negative view - it polarised opinion and brought charges of "selling out" (even from the BJP). That didn't deter Singh. Besides, his political personality is still evolving.

Nostalgia for Vajpayee could become counter-productive. Vajpayee is gone and may never come back. Implicit in the pro-Vajpayee obsession is the

idea, rooted in the early 1970s pact between Washington and Beijing, that only the Right can take controversial decisions; the Left cannot. This view is simplistic. Nixon's Right-wing proclivities and Kissinger's deviousness cannot explain the deal with China, attributable to growing tensions with the USSR over the sharing of military technologies, etc. The analogy doesn't apply to India-Pakistan or BJP-Congress.

Many Pakistanis resent US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage's statement that Pakistan must do more to combat terrorism, in particular dismantle the supporting infrastructure. Pakistani observers believe the remark was made at India's behest and bears little relationship to reality: Pakistan has cooperated with the US in anti-al-Qaeda operations and reportedly lost 400 troops. Indian officials admit there has been little cross-border infiltration since November (barring this month). But Pakistani observers may be overreacting to Armitage. Similar statements were made by Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Paul Wolfowitz too.

The real issue is, should these perceptions, even if legitimate, be allowed to change the course and fate of the dialogue process, especially when they can be corrected (partly because the reality underlying them is itself changeable), and when neither India nor Pakistan has evolved a comprehensive policy on Kashmir which can be put on the negotiating table?

My answer is no; there is a heavy risk of losing a great opportunity for peace - and that too before the two sides have fully explored each other's concerns. I say this, although I am sensitive to Pakistani policy-makers' apprehensions about the proposed Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus. Their fear is two-fold. If they agree to allow its passengers to carry national passports, as distinct from United Nations documents or special "for Kashmiris only" permits, they would implicitly accept the LoC as the international border, without proper negotiations. Secondly, once the bus starts rolling, it will further legitimise the LoC as the international border.

These fears must be addressed. But a mutually acceptable solution can be found. It would be premature to give up on it without trying - and trying hard. The best way to try would be for both Manmohan Singh and Musharraf to start making formal/informal contacts with each other.

Musharraf has been part of the dialogue process. Manmohan Singh has not. Singh must demonstrate a visible, strong commitment to the dialogue, including willingness to move away from stated positions. He must appoint high-level interlocutors to start exploratory talks on Kashmir. Singh must personally take charge of the process. He must be seen to own it. Musharraf must be maximally flexible and keep the talks going. Neither country can afford an impasse.