

Continued talks imperative

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IT is surprising that the Indian Foreign Minister, Natwar Singh, should have reservations about President Gen. Pervez Musharraf's suggestion that the Kashmir question had to be discussed within a fixed time-frame. It was evident from the outset that the composite dialogue between India and Pakistan could not be left open-ended.

The dialogue was resumed after much deliberation and with the hope that it would reach a mutually acceptable conclusion, unlike several previous attempts. That explains the mood of optimism that prevailed when the composite dialogue actually began early this year.

With his past reputation as being something of a hardliner where dealings with Pakistan were concerned, based mainly on his attitude towards Islamabad while serving as a member of the late Ms Indira Gandhi's team, Natwar Singh's reticence in accepting Pakistan's peace overtures at face value would have been understandable. However, on joining Ms Sonia Gandhi's cabinet, almost the first policy declaration that he made was that he would undertake "constructive engagements" with the neighbours. He was even reported as saying that talks with Pakistan would continue "even if the large-scale terror attacks continue." This, as the comment in an Indian news journal put it could be "music to Pakistani ears."

However, New Delhi lost no time in conveying to the American deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, on his recent visit to New Delhi that the cross-border movement of terrorists from the Pakistani side had yet to stop and that Pakistan had allowed the infrastructure for cross-border terrorism to continue. Pakistan had to issue a firm denial immediately.

Natwar Singh also maintained that the Americans were keeping Pakistan under pressure to work out peace with India. However, it seemed that the Indians themselves leaned on Washington for support. In fact, as the Indian media was quick to note, the US ambassador in New Delhi, David Muford, was one of the first visitors to call on Natwar Singh after he had joined Manmohan Singh's gov-

case. Most recent analyses of the Kashmir question suggest that the US would not want to be a party to the problem. The study conducted by a professional lobbyist commissioned by India towards the end of the 1990s also suggested that "the US should avoid tilts in its dealings with South Asia."

An Indian scholar Reeta Chowdhri Tremblay, who conducted a study on the Kashmir movement while at the University of Chicago, came to the conclusion that the "continued violence in the Valley did not seem to help the cause of either the Kashmir lobby in the US or Pakistan's protesting against the violation of human rights in the (Indian occupied) Valley."

During a visit to New Delhi in September 1997, (the first year of President Clinton's second term) Karl F. Inderfurth, US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, made it quite clear that the US did not intend to play an active role as mediator in the Kashmir issue. Washington largely adhered to the same policy in subsequent years.

There is nonetheless the view held by some policy planners in the US that "American concern with terrorism has contributed to a certain degree of convergence of Indian and US interests." This was also evident from the statements of the US deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, after his recent official visit to the region. However, Pakistan is firmly of the view that whatever violence occurs in the Valley is prompted by the excessive Indian security forces' presence there and the continued abuse of the Kashmiri people's human rights.

There is also a view which is now gaining ground that if New Delhi would give the bona fide representatives of the Kashmiri people a genuine share in the governance of the occupied state, some sort of way out of the continuing impasse would probably become manifest. In its

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ernment as foreign minister. It is also known that Armitage's "first intensive interaction" with the newly appointed national security adviser, J.N. Dixit, covered India's plans for missile defence.

However, it is clear that it is the new face of India that now confronts Pakistan. It is in the interest of peace in India and Pakistan and the region as well that the composite dialogue should continue without any loss of commitment or of momentum. It is hoped that the agenda for talks on various specific areas of bilateral relations should not be diluted or dropped. There will also have to be something much more substantial than the mere setting up of an India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh cricket team (as visualized by Natwar Singh in one of his recent interviews) to guide the composite dialogue to a positive conclusion.

Leaders on both sides of the border should also realize that much patience would be needed to continue with the peace process. Natwar Singh could be expected to be more supportive of the Pakistan president's suggestion of a timeframe for the talks on Kashmir. Without a result-oriented dialogue, the resolution of the Kashmir question would not be easy to achieve. It is encouraging to note that Pakistan and India appear to have delinked their bilateral relationship from any regional setup if their performance at the recent meeting of the Council of SAARC foreign ministers was anything to go by. This should lead to a greater emphasis on the bilateral efforts for peace.

With the start of the India-Pakistan peace process, there is also a growing realization that the attempts at resolving the long festering Kashmir dispute would also be linked to the induction of the representatives of the Kashmiri people. The efforts in the past remained mostly confined to a bilateral format. While, according to the 1947 partition plan, it was mostly a question of whether Kashmir would accede to India or Pakistan, the situation in the disputed state now makes it abundantly clear that the Kashmiri people can no longer be kept out of a peace process.

Indeed, most Kashmir watchers now seem to be of the view that the Kashmiri people themselves do not regard mere accession as directly relevant to what their future is going to be. The Kashmiris' own objective appears to be work towards some form of independence. What the form should be cannot be decided without their participation in the talks now in progress.

The United States was at one time directly involved in the sorting out of the differences between India and Pakistan. This seems to be no longer the

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recent exchanges with India, Pakistan too has stressed the view. On the other hand, it is also becoming clear that the unrest in the occupied state would not end unless the Kashmiris themselves become masters of their own destiny. The Kashmiri people would not want the hegemony either of India or Pakistan over their home state.

However, a study published in *Pacific Affairs* (Winter 1996-97), said that with the formation of a US-India working group on counter-terrorism, there had been the emergence of a significant pro-India lobby in the US Congress. Yet, for the sake of maintaining balance in the South Asian region the US was not likely to alter its policy on Kashmir. Consequently, sometimes it is surmised that Pakistan and some of the so-called "secessionists" would continue "to refer to the UNCIP resolution to vindicate their demand for a plebiscite in the disputed state."

It seems relevant to recall that according to Prof Robert G. Wirsing, a promised South Asia expert, the Indian diplomat, J.N. Dixit, while he was India's foreign secretary in 1993, listed five points which were relevant to any attempt to break the deadlock over Kashmir.

The points were: One, we (i.e. India) accept that there is alienation in the valley; two, the government of India must explore the roots of alienation; three, the responsibility for the alienation cannot be placed wholly on Pakistan; four, the alienation cannot be dealt with by India's security forces; and Five, we (i.e. India) believe that India has to play a very key role. According to Wirsing, Dixit believed that Kashmir was potentially extremely explosive and needed to be defused at the earliest.

J.N. Dixit is a key member of the Manmohan Singh cabinet. Even if he does not directly deal with the planning of India's foreign policy, he can potentially exercise considerable influence on evolving a strategy to implement New Delhi's Kashmir policy. One would hope that he still regards his analysis as valid and it is presumed that he will invest his influence in evolving a policy of peace for the region. If he does, he will significantly contribute to the successful outcome of the ongoing composite dialogue.