



Prospects of composite dialogue

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India-Pakistan relations have made considerable progress towards normalization since the December 13, 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. That had led India to recall its High Commissioner to Pakistan, sever all communications links with Pakistan, including the closure of its airspace to PIA flights and order wartime deployment of troops on the borders. Pakistan had reacted in a like manner, which resulted in a dangerous eyeball-to-eyeball military stand off between the two nuclear powers for more than a year.

However, on 18 April 2003 Prime Minister Vajpayee of India in a speech in Srinagar extended a hand of friendship to Pakistan, and President Musharraf who had, ever since the failed Agra summit, repeatedly urged India to resume the dialogue, reciprocated positively and immediately. The process of rapprochement that began with Mr. Vajpayee's Srinagar overture led to rapid restoration of full diplomatic relations, resumption of air, train and bus services, revival of sporting and cultural exchanges and commencement of the process of composite dialogue. The two countries have also reached an agreement in principle to reopen their respective consulates in Karachi and Mumbai and start the bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. All these have generated tremendous hope and euphoria of a breakthrough among the general public in both countries.

The first important meeting of the composite dialogue process was held between the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan in New Delhi on 27-28 June 2004. A meeting between the concerned Federal Secretaries of the two countries on the issue of Wuller Barrage was held in Islamabad on 28-29 July. Talks on friendly exchange of artists, journalists and parliamentarians were held in New Delhi on 3-4 August, and on Siachin and Sir Creek just concluded in New Delhi between two separate delegations. On 10-11 August talks will be held in Lahore on economic and commercial cooperation. Finally a meeting

starting at each other. This has been typical of India-Pakistan relationship which resemble a roller coaster, full of highs and lows, slow climb and fast downhill, sideways and into the loop, lots of screaming, shouting and excitement caused by the high speed but always stopping from where it starts, to begin again. The present euphoria, the mutual goodwill and the fatigue with the past are nothing new. Therefore it is very difficult to be more than cautiously optimistic that the outcome this time will be any different.

However, despite a few signs of persisting mistrust and impatience there are some new factors as well which are likely to give peace a better chance this time. These are: One) the strong, overwhelming, unprecedented and unmistakable desire among the peoples of India and Pakistan for peace, amity and friendship, clearly manifested during the recently held 'cricket matches, should exert pressure on both the governments to show flexibility and accommodation. Two) both countries know that unlike the past, neither the "flaming war" nor the "cold war" are any longer the options because the former will lead to mutual and assured destruction, or MAD, while the latter will considerably slow down their pace of economic development and become a cause of aggravated social and political instability of devastating proportions. Three) overt nuclearisation of the two countries with sophisticated and advanced delivery vehicles has radically transformed a regional dispute into a threat to international peace and security. Consequently, all the major powers of the world, including China, would react strongly to any display of nuclear irresponsibility by either of them. Four), both India and Pakistan have signed many important regional and international agreements which will oblige them to cooperate in the fields of economy, trade, terrorism and drug trafficking. The WTO, which comes into effect next January and SAFTA in the framework of SAARC, which will become fully operative by 2008, are two such agree-

ments. That means that even if bilateral relations between them hit a dead end once again, they will have to honor their commitments to each other under these regional and international agreements. Five), normal relations and cooperation between India and Pakistan are indispensable if they want to tackle any of their core common problems like poverty, population explosion, terrorism, drug trafficking, water scarcity and rapidly growing demand for energy.

In addition to these there are certain immutable ground realities which should persuade the leaders and politicians of both countries to modify their stance from rigidity to flexibility. These are: 1) Pakistan cannot force India by "high or low intensity war" to make concession on Kashmir, 2) India on its part cannot stop Pakistan from taking every possible measure, short of a full scale war, to attempt to change the status quo in Jammu and Kashmir thereby causing tension and risk of war but without gaining any concessions from India, 3) India may be able bear the huge economic, political and moral cost of suppressing the Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination, but it cannot kill their aspiration for Azadi. 3) While the international community is deeply concerned at the possibility of an armed conflict between India and Pakistan, it is incapable of persuading or compelling either to change its stance on Kashmir. Therefore, any desperate act on the part of either in the expectation of intervention by the world community will only result in aggravating the situation without leading to a solution.

These meetings have done a great deal to improve relations between the two countries and the atmosphere in the whole region but not resolved any of the major issues as yet. However, given the intrinsically complex nature of India-Pakistan relations, which have been rendered even more difficult during 57 years of tension, this is not unexpected. Secondly, all the issues have been, unfortunately and erroneously, linked to the intractable dispute over Kashmir. Consequently, progress has been slow on main issues and despite the fact that full diplomatic relations have been restored and significant results achieved in other areas, a sense of apprehension prevails that all this may yet come to a naught as before.

In a meeting with the German Foreign Minister, who visited Islamabad on July 22, President Musharraf was reported to have told him that peace and security in South Asia would depend on the progress made in the composite dialogue on various issues including the dispute on Jammu and Kashmir. A day latter, in a meeting with the Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh, who was in Islamabad for the SAARC Foreign Ministers conference, President Musharraf is reported to have told him that without any progress towards the settlement of the core issue of Kashmir, no headway on CBMs was possible. And although he did not push for any timeframe on Kashmir, he emphasised that progress on the issue could not be left open ended.

The Foreign Office spokesman also seems to have told the media that the President was very clear that the two sides had to go by the principle of simultaneity and that progress could not be made in one area while the other was kept on hold. On his part the Indian Foreign Minister, in a departure statement before leaving Pakistan, said that the Indian government could not rush into things because it had to take its coalition partner along and that we had to be patient. These statements and counter statements have been followed by mild controversies on the pace and timeframe for progress on the Kashmir issue.

Thus we see that the two sides while talking to each other are also

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To conclude, history, logic and enlightened self-interest should all persuade the two to keep talking and resolve the issues as and when an agreement has been reached on any without linking it to progress on others. It is time to reverse the refrain that "there can be no durable peace without the settlement of the Kashmir issue", to "there can be no amicable settlement of the Kashmir issue without friendly relations and a permanent peace".

Most of all the two can never alleviate the dire poverty of hundreds of millions of their citizens without full normalization and cooperation. Take for example tourism, it alone if encouraged and allowed to flourish by the two governments by removing the tough visa, registration and travel restrictions will create thousands of small and medium scale businesses and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs overnight as well as reduce militancy, violence and crime. So let us hope that this time around they will be guided by better sense and the larger interest of the two peoples including the Kashmiris, who having paid a heavy price in terms of life, liberty and prosperity for the last 14 years are farther away from self-determination than they were before the Jihad that started in December 1989.

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