

# ilateral talks — rhetoric and reality

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the launch of the peace initiative, both sides have exchanged a number of significant proposals for improving people-to-people contact. However, there is not an inch of progress even where there is an agreement in principle.

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At the meeting of the Foreign Secretaries in New Delhi on June 28, the two sides agreed to restore the full strength of 110 in the missions. Two months later, a formal letter allowing this is yet to be exchanged. India says there is no need for such a letter; Pakistan thinks otherwise. Since

use since the 1965 war. The agreement was followed by technical level talks on the details. The meeting held early this year was inconclusive. When the two Foreign Ministers met in Islamabad on the sidelines of the SAARC meet in July, the idea to revive the bus link was deferred. Instead, it was agreed to revive the rail link. The reason cited was that a bus link was not feasible for economic reasons.

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Pakistan Television (PTV) in the third week of August, a distraught viewer from Sindh asked Gen Musharraf why the Sindh-Rajasthan link was not being expedited. "I know [the] people of Sindh are keen on an early opening of the route to India. You see, we have agreed to the opening of [the] Indian consulate in Karachi and now you could get your visas easily. Be happy, one of your problems is being resolved. All in good time," the President said.

The recent agreement on the reopening of the consulates in Mumbai and Karachi, shut down in the early 1990s, is undoubtedly good news, particularly for the people of the port city and Sindh. At the moment, people from all over Pakistan have to go to Islamabad to apply for the Indian visa. And the lucky ones have to travel to India via Lahore. The same is the case with the Indian citizens who can get a visa only in New Delhi. Last year, both sides agreed in principle to run a ferry service between Karachi and Mumbai but there has been little real progress on the ground.

Though the two sides are committed to the early reopening of the consulates, there are serious doubts on this becoming a reality. Apprehensions have only been strengthened with the recent statement of Gen Musharraf that Islamabad would like simultaneous progress on the resolution of Kashmir and other confidence-building measures (CBMs). He has further complicated matters by implying in an interview that jihadi camps will shut down only if there is an agreement on Kashmir.

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ers all the problems with India as 'minor irritants.' Promotion of people-to-people contacts and friendly exchanges in various fields have been hostage to the Kashmir issue. At the moment there is no category of tourist visa between the two countries. Visits can be undertaken only to see relatives or for medical emergencies or business.

It is not a lack of imaginative proposals but the lack of political will that has adversely impacted on the promotion of people-to-people contacts between India and Pakistan. The scope for friendly exchanges is tremendous.

Cinema owners in Pakistan have actually demanded permission to screen Indian films; the Pakistani film industry is in the doldrums. Several weeks ago, the Government agreed to consider the proposal but there is no real movement. Likewise, there is a meaningless ban on Indian entertainment television channels, observed more in the breach. Health and education are just two examples in the services sector where there is tremendous potential for cooperation for the common good of the people.

India, on its part, could step out of the cycle of reciprocity and consider unilateral steps. For instance, why should it invoke the principle of reciprocity in the visa regime? New Delhi can come up with imaginative programmes to share with the people of Pakistan, India's advances in fields such as information technology, education and health. Will the two sides rise above partisan considerations and respond to the needs of the people? COURTESY THE HINDU

# Indo-Pak bil

By B Muralidhar Reddy

*Indo-Pak Bilateralism - 26/12/2004*  
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**T**HE Congress, which leads the United Progressive Alliance Government at the Centre, has raised doubts about Pakistan's sincerity towards the bilateral peace process. In its strongest indictment of the process that began in April 2003, the party, at its recent All-India Congress Committee session, also wondered whether New Delhi was dealing with the 'right regime' in Islamabad.

The operative text of the AICC resolution on India-Pakistan ties reads: "The Congress Party had extended broad support to the last government to deal with the scourge of cross-border terrorism. But cross-border terrorism continues to be a menace, as it is aided and abetted from across the borders. We seem to be dealing with a neighbouring government that has failed or is unable to deliver on its promises. Yet we should continue to have faith in [the] prospects of a dialogue in the spirit of [the] Shimla Agreement and other agreements."

Strong words indeed, coming from an organisation that prides itself on being the 'national party of governance'. The Congress' reservations on Pakistan's commitment to the peace process tallies with the Government's assessment, as reflected in the recently released annual report of the Union Home Ministry.

The Congress has chosen to speak out just

before the Foreign Ministers of the two countries are to meet in New Delhi (on September 5 and 6) to take stock of the first round of the composite dialogue. A one-to-one meeting at the highest level is also possible in the next four weeks. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf could meet on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session in New York later in September. Thus the AICC has expressed its opinion knowing full well the adverse impact it could have on these contacts.

How did things come to such a pass after so much hype? It is certainly not due to a lack of interaction. Never have the two sides met so many times, at so many levels, covering so many subjects in a span of 16 months, as they have since the Kashmir initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. There has also not been a dearth of proposals on every conceivable subject; even on Kashmir, the most contentious issue. Yet for all the rhetoric of a new bonhomie following Mr Vajpayee's extension of the hand of friendship in April 2003, the two countries have not even returned to the level of relations they enjoyed before the Dec 13, 2001 attack on Parliament.

Of course, Pakistan's obsession with Kashmir — it links every move for normalisation of ties with resolution of the issue — is the main reason for the lack of significant progress. But India cannot escape blame as it has conventionally relied on the principle of reciprocity in areas such as the visa regime.

The result is that the common people suffer though the whole process was kicked off in their name. Both countries have adopted an

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