

# Progress in the dialogue

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DAWN

THE resumed dialogue between India and Pakistan after the breakthrough achieved in January this year has completed its first stage with meetings in New Delhi between the foreign secretaries and then the foreign ministers. The latter meeting drew the curtain on this round with a commitment from both sides to continue the process until all problems had been addressed.

The dialogue will move to the summit level when President Musharraf meets Mr Manmohan Singh, the Indian prime minister, in New York where both will go later this month, in connection with the UN General Assembly. Both leaders have publicly announced their intention to steer the relationship in the direction of peace and cooperation.

Following this important contact that would doubtless give a fillip to the dialogue process, two meetings are scheduled between Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, and his Indian counterpart, one in New Delhi later this year, and one in Dhaka early next year on the eve of Saarc summit. The foreign ministers are likely to meet almost every month on various occasions. The bilateral dialogue, however, will resume after a meeting between the foreign secretaries before the end of the year.

Though the joint communique, issued at the conclusion of the first round strikes a positive note and promises greater progress, as the dialogue takes up the various items of the agreed agenda, a certain amount of acrimony has begun to manifest itself in statements from the two sides, specially on Kashmir. While accentuating the positive on the dialogue process itself, India has kept repeating its allegations that Pakistan continues to facilitate the entry of militants into Kashmir. With a ceasefire in force along the LoC since last November, which the Indian side has utilised to put up a fence along it, the Pakistan side has not only denied this accusation, but has drawn attention to the heightened human rights violations by India in the occupied Kashmir.

Analysts of the indo-Pakistan scene see a pattern in the strategy of New Delhi that points clearly to their game plan. They have agreed to the resumption of the dialogue, but want to pursue a strategy that is working in their dialogue with China. The major obstacle in normality in Sino-Indian relations is the boundary dispute, which caused a conflict in 1962. For more than a decade, both countries put this problem on the back burner, while moving at a faster pace on economic and cultural relations. Neither side has changed its basic stance, but both sides attach importance to normalizing relations wherever possible, and to remove the impression that they face a threat from the other.

India's expectation that Pakistan may be persuaded to follow a similar line with regard to Kashmir is not likely to be realized. Firstly, Jammu and Kashmir is a densely populated region with over 15 million inhabitants, unlike the territory disputed between India

and China, most of which is a sparsely populated region at very high altitudes.

Secondly, China has been proposing a package deal, based on accepting the realities inherited from history. On the contrary, the status quo in Jammu and Kashmir consists of India occupying a large territory, on the basis of its military might, by violating UN resolutions that provide for the people of the state to determine their future. The matter involves the very basis on which British India was partitioned.

More seriously, the Muslim majority in Kashmir is totally alienated from India, which has used strong-arm tactics, amounting to state terrorism, to suppress the indigenous freedom struggle launched by the Kashmiris 15 years ago. An Indian force of

be moving towards congruence. The impression was given that the dialogue, once initiated, would move with deliberations and a resolve to find solutions rather than look for reasons to call the process off. In this context, some progress can be achieved even on Kashmir by opening a road connection between the two parts of Kashmir to facilitate contacts between members of divided families.

One point, on which India has not made any move to take cognizance of, is any reduction in the ferocity of its repression of the Kashmiris. With the appearance of cracks within the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, India seems keener to divide and weaken the Kashmiri movement for democratic rights, than to deal meaningfully with their aspirations. Indeed, the Indian foreign minister has not minced words about the status of Kashmir in the Indian constitution.

In brief, the picture that emerges at this stage of the dialogue is that India is ready to take numerous steps that would help normalize the relations and yield economic benefits. These would include signing of agreement on the Iran-India gas pipeline, and a considerable easing of trade and cultural exchanges. Progress can be achieved on nuclear CBMs, Siachen and Sir Creek from within the items of the agreed agenda. But a serious and in-depth consideration of

the Kashmir dispute is not envisaged, nor would India compromise on its basic stand. Its maximum "concession" would be confined to accepting the LoC as the international boundary. India would also accommodate Pakistan by including Kashmiris in the dialogue process.

In this perspective, the statement by the Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman that the concluding meeting between the two foreign ministers had produced a highly significant agreement points to a resolve by Pakistan to go the extra mile to keep the process going. The report that Mr Tariq Aziz, who is secretary of Pakistan's National Security Council, has held meetings with Indian security adviser, J.N. Dixit, also points to special efforts to remove hurdles to the dialogue process. It may be recalled that he had met Mr Brajesh Mishra, the security adviser to the BJP government, in late 2003, to prepare the ground for the breakthrough achieved at the Saarc summit in Islamabad in early January 2004.

All the main indicators for the current Indo-Pakistan dialogue are positive. After the 10-month long attempt at coercion from December 2001 to October 2002, India had realized that durable peace, and stability in the subcontinent could only be achieved through the dialogue Pakistan had been proposing from the start of Gen Musharraf's assumption of leadership. Public opinion in the both countries is in favour of calling a halt to conflict and confrontation, and focusing instead on cooperation to promote development.

The major world powers, and the US in particular, are keen to promote detente, and mutually beneficial cooperation in the subcontinent. We can surely move to the next phase of the dialogue with the conviction that problems are best solved through patient, peaceful negotiation.

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700,000 armed men is engaged in suppressing the struggle for rights by the Kashmiri people, over 75,000 of whom have laid down their lives, with many more jailed and tortured, thousands of women dishonoured, and countless houses and villages destroyed. Unless a solution to the Kashmir problem can be found that is acceptable to them, peace will not return to this "heaven on earth".

Pakistan could resume the dialogue, and even agree on some areas of immediate interest, such as the gas pipeline from Iran to India through Pakistan, or resolution of lesser disputes such as Siachen, Sir Creek, and improved cultural and commercial ties. But a sense of mutual trust and confidence, that is essential for good-neighbourly relations, will not be achieved till the core issue of Kashmir is resolved.

That a summit meeting is planned shortly between the two countries at New York is most fortunate. Though the CBMs have been proceeding, and many from the professions of art and culture from both sides continue to pay visits and strengthen a positive outlook, signs of emerging mistrust cannot be ignored. Indian accusations that militants keep entering Kashmir from Pakistan controlled territory are matched by allegations from some responsible Pakistanis that the numerous Indian consulates opened in Afghanistan are mainly engaged in activities hostile to Pakistan. This conclusion is being drawn because anti-Pakistan sentiment is being fanned, and the Indian consulates have no legitimate interests like welfare of nationals or handling of trade.

Doubts are already being raised whether the dialogue is getting anywhere. Some progress was visible from the meetings that took up items from the eight-point agenda, notably on nuclear CBMs, easing of visa policy, and the positions on Siachen appeared to