

Musharraf-Manmohan meeting

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President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh are to meet for the first time on September 24 to review the first round of composite dialogue. Much is dependent upon this highest level of political interaction, especially with regard to the pace and linkages between the major differences and movement on more easily agreeable areas. Both sides want to make this summit useful, although both sides continue to have different perceptions about its outcome and the composite dialogue has done a lot of homework. While there is no possibility of a breakdown, some understanding may be reached over expediting the present pace of process. Will the twain be able to develop a good rapport and set mutually agreeable pace and direction?

Before departing for New York, President Musharraf has articulated his expectations from the meeting in a more careful way. Expecting "positive indications towards progress", he said, this would be a "wholesome meeting, but very much including Kashmir". Mindful of Indian sensitivity towards "unifocal" approach and still holding to his guns, General Musharraf has tried to bring a balance to his formulation. On the other hand, the Indians are not putting too much premium on this meeting and are more interested in keeping the process going while easing General Musharraf's hyperactive approach to the Kashmir solution. For Prime Minister Manmohan Singh it will be a crucial encounter to know his interlocutor and explore a method to get the process moving. There are some proposals up his sleeves that can provide some impetus to the process President Musharraf is too keen to push ahead without putting Kashmir on the backburner.

Some confidence building measures on Kashmir, that were to be announced by Mr Manmohan Singh during his planned visit to Jammu and Kashmir, may be proposed, besides some forward movement on the pipeline and other areas. Prior to Manmohan's departure, the Indian government has shown its willingness to talk to Hurriyat Conference leaders without any prior conditions and POTA has been withdrawn. Unilaterally announcing the relaxation of visa regime, External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh and National Security Advisor J N Dixit more or less fulfilled their promise made during the South Asian Free Media As-

sociation's reception for Mr Khurshed Mehmood Kasuri in New Delhi to grant multiple-entry visas to Pakistani journalists with three-year experience in a national or international media organisation of 'repute'.

This is a most welcome step that must be reciprocated by Pakistan to allow free movement of journalists across subcontinent. Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman is, however, wrong in taking the plea that had this issue been taken up by the two foreign ministers the relevant departments would have taken the decision by now since this matter was openly deliberated upon in an open reception by SAFMA for Mr Kasuri who had promised to take up the matter back home with the ministry of interior and other concerned departments. SAFMA has been struggling to get a visa-free regime for journalists and free movement of media persons across the frontiers of South Asia. Thanks to its hectic lobbying, New Delhi has broken the ice; now the ball is in the court of Pakistan Foreign Office to allow Indian journalists a more liberal visa regime. Islamabad should also allow forward movement in areas of people to people contact, trade normalisation and tourism.

On Kashmir, we must understand that there is no quick-fix solution to this 57-year-old dispute that can satisfy both the sides and, above all, the Kashmiris who are both ethnically/regionally and ideologically divided. Nor can it be solved without creating a broad vested interest in India to realise the necessity to solve it to achieve much greater regional interest. But, as Musharraf insists, India should seriously recognise it as an issue and address it in a more "purposeful" manner (the expression used by Manmohan). What General Musharraf is yet to realise is that after ruling out the solutions not acceptable to the two sides, nothing will be left on the table except a process that undertakes softening of the Loc, as opposed to what India insists upon by turning it into an international border, allowing free interaction among Kashmiris who may get greater freedom without becoming sovereign of the two occupying states. What will be the concrete outcome can't be pre-judged. However, a direction with an open-ended process can be set after having built sufficient trust in each other and completely outlawing violence and demilitarising the disputed region.

What is quite perturbing is that prior to their meeting both the countries may once

again enter into public polemics at the UN. While Musharraf may refer to the issue of Kashmir, India is likely to respond by raising the level of its concern about cross-border terrorism. This will be in violation of the understanding reached between the two countries to lower the public rhetoric, yet they will be addressing their domestic constituencies by indulging in unnecessary polemics. Perhaps, after the round between the two foreign ministers, the two sides have also learnt to tolerate the tougher statements on their respective maximalist positions. The time is in fact right for getting serious about the process and making it more productive and meaningful while knowing well that it will take longer than we expect to iron out differences.

The first round of composite dialogue has produced some tangible results, but most observers rightly feel that it has not picked necessary momentum due to rigidities of positions just not on major issues but also on most peripheral items on the agenda. If the new government in India was more than careful on more contentious issues while being somewhat forthcoming on steps for normalisation of relations, the Musharraf administration was more focused on Kashmir and security issues than what it considers peripheral matters. Tension and distraction have been visible in the process due to varying emphasis and disparate priorities of the two sides.

Due to elections in India and change of government, the process was hamstrung and left to the discretion of bureaucracies who are devoid of any fresh ideas or flexibility. The movement can take place only on political level. Musharraf may be more at ease with technocrat Manmohan than a poetic and big political figure like Vajpayee. It can become a pragmatic and business like relationship. But what must be realised is that no big breakthroughs are around the corner. Pakistan cannot get Kashmir on a platter, nor should it make the process too vulnerable under the weight of deadlines on Kashmir.

There are limits to Manmohan Singh's mandate, as compared to all-powerful Musharraf. Any movement on any critical issue with India is not possible without a bipartisan consensus and we must understand it. Keep the process going. Musharraf and Manmohan must set the ball rolling and allow it to pick its natural pace.

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