

# New actors and factors in Indo-Pak process

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**A**s the peace process moves and the composite dialogue is likely to enter a more substantive phase, new elements and actors enter the fray making it more dynamic and complex. The interplay of internal and external dynamics is now beginning to have an impact than was anticipated. Powerful lobbies are emerging to sustain the process, making it difficult for governments to wriggle out. The Kasuri-Natwar round, though not prized with a breakthrough, did break grounds for forward movement in some crucial areas, including an understanding on a back-channel. Much depends now on Musharraf-Manmohan meeting on September 22 at New York in setting the pace of the composite dialogue. What are future prospects?

Although the pace and results of the first round of the composite dialogue were not as bad as being projected by the media since you could not expect miracles in the preliminary round of initial exchanges, the observers in both India and Pakistan feel that this has not even kept pace with an incremental approach stressed by New Delhi. And they are, perhaps, right. While talking to a Pakistan parliamentary delegation, former Prime Minister Vajpayee also expressed his concern over the 'slow pace' of ongoing negotiation. Similarly, the Left is quite perturbed over the snail-pace of the dialogue process. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh consolidates his hold, a very close friend of his says, he is likely to methodically take the process forward unlike 'wayward and instinctive' approach of his predecessor.

What should not, however, be ignored is that India went through a most unpredictable election campaign, after the January 6 Islamabad joint statement was issued, and a new coalition government of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) headed by a technocrat, Dr Manmohan Singh, replaced a much stronger Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government of Mr A B Vajpayee. The process was badly affected by the change of government since, it is alleged by highly placed sources in New Delhi, the Prime Minister Office, run by National Security Advisor to Mr Vajpayee, Brajesh Mishra, did not leave any record of understanding reached (if there was any) with President Musharraf for the new incumbent. Yet the process not only survived, but also delivered certain crucial confidence building measures.

No doubt the Kasuri-Natwar round started with highly charged statements on the 'centrality' of the Kashmir issue stressed by Pakistan foreign minister and Indian external affairs minister's rebuttal with an added concern about the 'rise in cross-border terrorism'. The talks, however, got going in a more business-like manner. Although India rejected Pakistan's proposal to appoint a special emissary for talks on Kashmir, as was done in the case

of Sino-Indian talks on Sikkim, New Delhi indeed has agreed to revive the back-channel, revealed a highly placed and most reliable source, consisting of National Security Advisor J N Dixit and Secretary National Security Council of Pakistan Tariq Aziz. This was also assured by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that the Foreign Secretary level talks on the issues of security and Kashmir will be more 'purposeful' and 'substantive'.

Overall, the two foreign ministers, who have in fact developed a good personal chemistry, were able to pave the way for the gas pipeline from Iran to India without haggling on granting MFN status to India by Pakistan, or New Delhi reducing its tariff regime to allow Islamabad the benefit of MFN status it had granted. Demilitarisation of Siachen is almost agreed, given the agreement reached between the two secretaries, and joint survey of the boundary pillars in the horizontal segment of the international boundary in Sir Creek area is also a step forward. In terms of promoting tourism and pilgrimages to sacred sites, the two sides have agreed to introduce group visa. Talks on Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus-route and Munnabao-Khokrapur rail link also moved ahead. The Joint Statement issued speaks of "the serious and sustained dialogue to find a peaceful negotiated final settlement" of "bilateral issues, including Jammu and Kashmir to the satisfaction of both sides".

**N**o less important was the unequivocal announcement by Mr Natwar Singh to grant countrywide, multiple-entry visas to the Pakistani journalists, endorsed by National Security Advisor J N Dixit, at the reception hosted in honour of Mr Khurshid Kasuri, organised by SAFMA India in New Delhi on September 7. While both the foreign ministers agreed to jointly support SAFMA become the Apex Regional Body at the next Saarc Council of Ministers' meeting, Mr Kasuri assured SAFMA India that he will try his best in reciprocating India's goodwill gesture towards the Pakistani journalists by allowing similar facility to the Indian journalists after consulting other concerned ministries. But, it is regrettable that the interior ministry in Pakistan has tried to throw a spanner in the works by deporting Resident Editor of Hindustan Times, Mr Kanwar Sandhu. It may also be mentioned that Mr Natwar Singh welcomed the visit of 17 Pakistani journalists to J&K and a very high profile visit of sector leaders from Pakistan to the Indian Punjab being organised by SAFMA.

Not only that the people on both sides want peace and steady movement on all counts and peaceful settlement of disputes, including Kashmir, quite powerful lobbies and influential regional constituencies have got activated to push the process forward in the era of coalition politics in India. The Confederation of Indian Industry and big business houses are very keen in entering in joint projects and opening up trades on a win-win basis with their Pakistani counterparts and the Bol-

lywood that had crossed the limits in making war movies is now focusing on peace themes and joint productions. If the flourishing states in South carry no baggage against Pakistan, the traditionally hostile North or the Hindi-speaking cow-belt is now witnessing an upsurge for friendship with Pakistan. As the UP and Bihar governments led by lower castes-based parties are on the forefront of friendship with Pakistan, the governments in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh are competing in getting the Wahgah/Attari sector opened for both border co-operation in all sectors and tourism.

Chief Minister of Punjab Capt Amrinder Singh was here and now Chief Minister of Haryana Om Prakash Chautala is here to reap political benefits in his home state. To settle his water dispute with neighbouring East Punjab and run his election campaign, he is taking a bucket of 'sacred water' from the birth place of *Bhai Kanhaiya* as a part of 300th anniversary celebrations of "*Bakhshish Diwas*" of Kanhaiya. This bucket, along with four urns of water drawn from the birth places of Sikh saints of Sewapanthi sect in Sodhra, Pakistan, would be mixed with the water from Anand Sahib in India and would be taken on a "*harmony yatra*" to various parts of Haryana to motivate the people with the ideals of Bhai Kanhaiya, who did not discriminate among foes and friends while quenching their thirst and distributing water. How culture, religious traditions and the saints across our borders can play a positive role in bringing the two people closer and advance the agendas of regional players can be best explained by M Chaudhary Chautala's visit.

The fact of the matter is that the respective bureaucracies steeped in traditional rivalry and overwhelmed with zealously guarding their turf do not let things move forward in their respective spheres. Without the intervention of political leadership they can't relent, nor can intelligent *quid pro quos* and trade-offs across sectors be struck. The major issues that still dog the composite dialogue process, especially the dispute over Kashmir, cannot be handled in one-go, nor are there any quick-fix solutions. They can be solved in and through a process that allows, simultaneous, progress in all areas, especially by building bridges across Northern India and Pakistan. This is time for our Punjab to take the lead since Lahore will become the epicentre of Indo-Pak co-operation which will, in turn, help resolve the dispute over Kashmir which must not be dealt as a 'territorial dispute' but as an issue of the Kashmiri people and their aspirations. Let there be no hurdle in the way of Kashmiri people in interacting among themselves. The solution lies in a process that must soften LoC, not strengthen it, as should the other borders with two sovereign nations living peacefully side by side.

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