

# Manmohan-Musharraf meeting

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Is Manmohan Singh-Musharraf meeting a real breakthrough? No doubt it was a good meeting with positive signals. "I sincerely believe that today is a historic day and we have made a new beginning", said the Indian prime minister after the meeting and added: "I feel confident that despite the difficulties on the way, I and President Musharraf will work together and succeed in writing a new chapter in the history of our two nations".

The joint statement referred to the Kashmir question in these words: "The two leaders also addressed the issue of Jammu and Kashmir and agreed that possible options for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the issue should be explored in a sincere spirit and purposeful manner." As for confidence-building measures it said: "They agreed that confidence-building measures of all categories, under discussion between the two governments, should be implemented keeping in mind practical possibilities...in the spirit of the Islamabad statement, they agreed that CBMs will contribute to generating an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding so necessary for the well being of the peoples of both countries."

The two leaders further discussed the possibility of a gas pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan: "It was felt that such a project could contribute to the welfare and prosperity of the people of both countries and should be considered in the larger context of expanding trade and economic relations between India and Pakistan."

It appears that the two sides had done some homework and prepared the ground through back-channel contacts specifically in terms of Dixit-Tariq Aziz meetings. The tone and tenor of speeches made earlier at the United States General Assembly, which unlike the previous addresses at

the UN podium avoided accusatory references. Particularly noticeable was Manmohan Singh's remark that he was determined to carry forward the dialogue to yield "purposeful" and "mutually acceptable" results.

A cool understanding and a clear assessment of the prospects for an early resolution of the Kashmir dispute needs to be seen in the context of the interests and goals India is pursuing vigorously at present. India's larger goals and interests demand peaceful relations with Pakistan. Kashmir and tension with the neighbours, especially Pakistan adversely affects the prospects of attaining its larger ambitions which include the acquisition of the status of a global player for which it inter alia seeks a permanent seat at the Security Council. Its burgeoning strategic relationship with USA helps in strengthening its military muscle and economic prowess. Current Pakistan relation is an irritant that needs to be removed or at least softened. Trade, tourism, people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges will create conditions for the forging of a more congenial climate and hopefully friendly relationship. If Kashmir blocks and slows down progress on this front, it is time something is done about it. There is also of course the international pressure, especially from USA for peaceful conditions in South Asia.

Pakistan has for the last many years been entreating India to agree to begin talks on various issues bedeviling relationships between the two countries, with Kashmir as the central question. Over the years, and especially after 9/11 Pakistan has been yielding ground, including willingness to "set aside" UN Resolutions on Kashmir, commitment to stop material support to the Kashmiris' struggling for their right of self determination, not resolutely raising the question of state brutal terrorism in the Occupied Valley and parts of Jammu, while India has gone ahead with the building of

the fence on the Line of Control, willingness to open the Khokharapar route to Sindh. Not much is known as to what exactly transpired between the two leaders in New York in their one to one, hour-long meeting.

While little of substance has come out from the Pakistan side, indications of what Manmohan Singh stressed have come to light in a press conference held by him. After reiterating his view that the meeting represented a new beginning and that the composite dialogue would be taken to its "constructive conclusion", he revealed that he had raised the question of terrorism in the meeting. To quote Mr Singh "I mentioned unambiguously to President Musharraf that the 'starting point of the whole dialogue' is the commitment given by Pakistan in the January 6 statement that Pakistan territory or territory under Pakistan's control will not be used for terrorist purposes. There is a reference to the January 6 statement and therefore there should be no doubt about that 'pre-condition for moving forward'. The Indian Prime Minister stated "we cannot express confidence in these measures if terrorist acts are on the increase. We cannot discuss any substantive issues on confidence-building measures if terrorist acts are not being controlled".

In other words, India can stop or delay the discussions on Kashmir by bringing up alleged cross border terrorism. As this particular matter is so assiduously used by India to keep Pakistan on the defensive, forcing it to play on the back foot, why is Pakistan shy of the international community into confidence about the reality of the situation. What exactly is the reason why Pakistan does not raise the question of strengthening the UN Military Observer's Group, which derives its mandate from a UN Security Council Resolution? Let the UN MOG monitor the LoC so that the accuracy of Indians allegations are ascertained and verified. It is time Pakistan plays its cards astutely.

After years of refusal, India came up with its much-lauded initiative in April 2003, when Vajpayee spoke from Srinagar. It took about a year for him to agree to attend the Saarc Summit in Islamabad and be a party to the famous joint statement. It has taken eight months, thereafter, for the two foreign ministers to talk about Kashmir in general terms, having agreed to in January to include it in the agenda for the composite dialogue. Manmohan Singh is already talking of the "precondition" of cross border terrorism!

The way we have been handling the Kashmir issue, it appears that we will be made to toe the line determined by India, first by a delay in the discussion of it and then being fobbed off with a solution which Indians may be able to afford to achieve their larger goals and interests. In the meantime Kashmiris will be lured with the grant of autonomy and a special status. The recent New Delhi offer of "unconditional talks" with the Hurriyyat indicates the way the wind is blowing. With Kashmiri leaders and activists being killed almost every day and support from Pakistan blocked altogether, how long will the brave but ageing and sick Mr Gillani and his fatigued colleagues carry on their fight for freedom?

Can Musharraf use his new found warm personal relationship with Manmohan Singh to expedite the actual discussion of options for the resolution of the Kashmir issue and not let months and intermittent allegations tied to the pretext of "terrorism", keep pushing away the goal posts? It will also be desirable on his part like Manmohan Singh, to take the Opposition and the cabinet into confidence before the Pakistani position on various options is determined.

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