

# Musharraf-Manmohan summit: A promising beginning

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**T**he summit meeting between President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has done more than what meets the eye. Most importantly, they have quite appreciably agreed to concur to the preferences of each side by congregating the opposite pulls that were not letting the composite dialogue move forward. If Mr. Singh has agreed to explore "possible options for a peaceful negotiated settlement" of Kashmir in a "sincere" and "purposeful" manner, Mr Musharraf has shown readiness to restore normalcy and co-operation between the two countries in the spirit of January 6 Islamabad Statement. Instead of keeping the confidence-building measures a hostage of one linkage or the other, both have resolved to implement all categories of CBMs on the table, besides agreeing to the gas pipeline in the larger context of economic relations. Could there be a better outcome?

The two governments must be lauded to have done their homework well in advance to make this summit a "laudable" and "historic" exercise. The result is no less spectacular for the composite dialogue that was not moving at a pace as being desired by a large majority of the people of the subcontinent. The critics on both sides are just making empty noises to belittle the outcome. Those who expect the solution of the Kashmir issue, and that too according to their own infantile desires, should be disappointed since there is no quick-fix solution to a dispute the two sides have failed to resolve in the last 56 years. Not astonishing is the disappointment of former eternal affairs minister of India, Mr. Yashwant Sinha, who has accused Manmohan Singh of ignoring India's vital position on "cross-border terrorism" and 'omission of the word "letter" in reference to January 6 statement (sic!).

The new government in New Delhi has been reiterating its stand, and quite vocally, on the issue of cross-border terrorism. And it has again been taken up by Manmohan Singh during his talks with Musharraf reminding him to fulfill the promise of not letting areas under Pakistan's control used for terrorism. Given the understanding reached between the two sides, the reference was made to follow the "spirit of the Islamabad joint statement" contributing to an "atmosphere of trust and understanding". The fact of the matter is that both Musharraf and Manmohan were able to build such a remarkable equation that they intelligently struck a strategic quid pro quo, Pakistani President and former prime minister Vajpayee were never able to: India agrees to sincerely and purposefully explore "possible options" on Kashmir and Pakistan agreed to normalize relations that could not be normalized, nor could CBMs implemented, if Musharraf had not agreed to fully address the Indian concern over cross-border infiltration.

That is why, in the face of criticism at home that cross-border terrorism was not mentioned in the joint statement of September 24, Manmohan Singh was forced to reiterate India's position that talks could not move forward nor could CBMs be implemented if cross-border terrorism continued. After getting what Musharraf had wanted (an assurance on serious talks to resolve Kashmir dispute), there was no justification on holding back the normalization process, which Islamabad erroneously thought to be in India's interest alone, that needs to be strengthened to create sufficient trust and vested interest in resolving the dispute that have been dogging Indo-Pak relations for too long. If Musharraf has succeeded in pushing the composite dialogue process at tandem with the negotiations on Kashmir, Manmohan has succeeded in getting the process going on all other tracks while making his interlocutor realise his commitment to not let Pak soil be used for cross-border infiltration that has already gone down substantially in August.

What the critics of peace fail to notice is that for the first time, after long years, not only Pakistani President but also the Indian Prime minister avoided using the UN General Assembly platform to vent their grievances and entering into a mud-slinging match. They, rather, used the occasion to reiterate their commitment to peace and negotiations to resolve their differences. The kind of atmospherics created by both sides and etiquettes observed were unprecedented. The personal chemistry the two leaders developed and respect they exhibited towards each other was true to our traditions but was not seen in earlier encounters. Musharraf developing the bond by invoking Singh's childhood memories responded courteously by asking him to speak on his behalf as well to the press after their meeting. Such bonhomie has never been witnessed in any earlier meeting. And this is very important in emotionally ridden Indo-Pak relations. The negotiation processes between the two countries had suffered, beside other factors, due to the conflict of heart and mind. It is essential that the heart and mind become one.

It seems that the strategic direction of the composite dialogue has been set. Now is the time to put parallel but complementary tracks together to swiftly settle those issues there are no differences or conflict of interests. The issues that need to be thought over where technical differences are a hindrance should be resolved by finding middle-ways, such as on Siachin, bus service between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar, Wullar Barrage, trade, gas pipeline and other areas of people to people contacts. The efforts should be focused on rationalizing and harmonizing tariff and customs regimes and removing paratariff and non-tariff barriers. The Indo-Pak normalization should help in giving boost to the efforts at the SAARC level in creating a free trade area on which agreement was reached on SAFTA at Islamabad summit. Cre-

ation of an Energy Grid, a South Asian Development Fund and greater coordination among the central banks should be given serious thought. The ministers of petroleum of India and Pakistan should conclude the framework agreement on the gas pipeline and high council of finance and commerce ministers be created to smoothen economic relations.

The agreement to implement confidence-building measures under discussion should be expedited and those handling technical talks must be told to find out ways to resolve differences, rather than sticking to their rigid formulae. Most important is opening up the traditional routes of people to people interaction, tourism and trade, between Pakistani Punjab and Northern India, between Karachi and Bombay-Gujarat, between Lahore and Amritsar, between Sindh and Rajasthan and, above all, between the divided Kashmir, Jammu-Sialkot and Srinagar-Muzaffarabad. The bilateral agreement of 1974 that enforced a very rigid and cumbersome visa regime should be reviewed to liberalize visa regime for divided families and all professional groups, above all for journalists.

**O**n Kashmir, after the two sides have agreed to explore possible options, a dialogue should be initiated at various levels, besides the official track, to find a way out that is acceptable to India and Pakistan. Most importantly, it is necessary to engage Kashmiris in the process since they are the real party sandwiched between the two countries. It is time to take steps to soften the LoC for greater interaction among the Kashmiris. While the dialogue on Kashmir between the two countries continues, the way should be found to engage Kashmiris in the process. More confidence building measure will be required to demilitarize Kashmir, stop violence and cross-border infiltration and stop human rights violations and hate-propaganda. Besides the talks on Kashmir, India and Pakistan must take measures to stabilize security and the nuclear regime and adopt a nuclear doctrine that ensures collective security and safeguards.

As Musharraf and Manmohan have initiated a good beginning, they must now think to take it to logical conclusion to make our South Asia a better place for more than one-fifth of humanity. A broadest consensus needs to be built on both sides without allowing any element to disrupt the process. The private initiatives should be encouraged to build confidence between the two sides, especially among the people, rather than stifled. Finally, without the involvement of the people in the peace and reconciliation process, nothing will be sustainable between India and Pakistan. The people are too eager to forge good neighbourly relations, let them play their role.

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