

India-Pakistan talks: the logjam continues

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On February 4, 2010 India formally offered to resume Foreign Secretary-level talks with Pakistan that had been stalled after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in late 2008.¹ Without clarifying the scope of discussions, Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao invited her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir for talks to New Delhi. Proposing the 18th and 25th of February for the meetings, Indian official sources made it clear that India was open to discussing all issues - including Balochistan – but that its sole focus would be on terrorist acts that are allegedly planned and executed from Pakistan. It was noted that this dialogue was meant to revive the bilateral relationship and therefore should not be seen as a resumption of the suspended Composite Dialogue.

This change in India's no-dialogue stance came after a dark period of fourteen months which had seen a frozen peace process and increased hostility between the two countries. With the Indian Army Chief announcing provocative new military doctrines and politicians and ministers frequently warning of swift and decisive action against Pakistan if another Mumbai-like attack was to occur, Pakistan's repeated efforts to revive the bilateral dialogue were rebuffed by Delhi.

This sudden change in the Indian position indicates a realisation of the limits, or even failure, of coercive diplomacy. India had perhaps calculated that suspending talks any further would not yield the concessions it sought from Pakistan. Instead, by prolonging this policy India risked losing the international sympathy and support it had gained since the Mumbai attacks. Strategically for its interests in the region as well as in the international circles, the time was ripe to reopen a dialogue with Pakistan, however superficial it may be.

An active behind-the-scenes role played by the US was yet another reason for the change in Indian position. Since the US was concerned that India-Pakistan tensions could derail its own vision to stabilise Afghanistan, American officials have in recent months been vigorously pressing for an easing of tensions and a revival of dialogue between the two countries. Indian willingness to resume the dialogue seems to be an effort to defuse international pressure since the Afghan project has reached a critical juncture. This is important for NATO forces since easing Pakistan-India

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tension allows Pakistan to concentrate on the western border it shares with Afghanistan.

Recent developments in Afghanistan may also have made India less comfortable. The prospect of accommodation with the Taliban in the wake of the London Conference and talk of an exit-strategy undoubtedly increased India's unease with the changing regional scenario. These uncertainties and the possibility of Pakistan playing a central role in the Afghan endgame forced New Delhi to end the bilateral deadlock so that it may maintain diplomatic leverage in a shifting strategic landscape.

Furthermore, the Indian government has been trying to engage Kashmiri leadership regarding the autonomy of Kashmir. However, the latter has repeatedly expressed its stance that Pakistan be invited to talks since no solution or even discussion will be acceptable without taking Pakistan on board. India therefore, would like back-channel talks with Pakistan on a 'non-territorial'² settlement of Kashmir initiated under former Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf.

In addition, India felt that by establishing a 'measured contact'³, it would be able to put more pressure on Pakistan. Unstructured dialogue would help to present terrorism as the core concern without giving Pakistan the chance to raise other issues that it considers extremely important. Besides, resumption of the Composite Dialogue while Pakistan has progressed notably on its fight against militancy would have served the purpose of opposition parties.

Welcoming the move, the government of Pakistan decided to accept the offer and Pakistan's Foreign Secretary along with his delegation reached New Delhi on February 24, 2010 with the hope of bridging longstanding differences. During the meeting, India handed over three dossiers to Pakistan - one of these dealt with individuals allegedly involved in the Mumbai attacks while the other two comprised information on HuJI and Brigade 313 commander Ilyas Kashmiri, a handler of David Headley and Khalistan elements that are allegedly based in Pakistan. The visiting delegation also handed over a paper on insecurities related to water.

India also demanded the handing over of 33 individuals; these include Pakistani nationals two of whom are serving Army officers, as well as Indian fugitives who have been involved in terror acts. While dismissing the dossier on Hafiz Saeed as mere 'literature and not evidence', Pakistan's Foreign Secretary also responded to repeated Indian references to terrorism by reminding his counterpart and the general public that Pakistan had witnessed "hundreds of Mumbais" and had lost 5,366 civilians in 3,043

terror attacks since 2008⁴ and needed no lecturing on the importance of tackling terrorism.

Media reports suggest that the delegation went to Delhi with a roadmap that would lead to a resumption of the aforementioned Composite Dialogue. Mr. Salman Bashir extended an invitation to External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna on behalf of Pakistan's Foreign Minister to visit Islamabad and suggested that Foreign Secretaries could meet a day before to finalise the agenda. The proposal envisaged a meeting between the Foreign Ministers to lay the ground for discussions between the Prime Ministers of both countries on the margins of the SAARC summit in Bhutan in late April where resumption of the Composite Dialogue could be announced through a joint statement. However, India was more interested in broadening the discussions at official levels and suggested a 'technical meeting'⁵ to improve cross-LoC trade, a meeting between Commerce Secretaries to carry forward discussions on trade issues and a meeting of the Indo-Pakistan judicial committee for the release of civilian prisoners and fishermen.

The meeting failed to melt the ice as was visible when both officials decided to conduct press briefings separately. It was also interesting to note that both countries made counter-claims regarding the issues that were discussed. The Indian Foreign Secretary claimed that 85% of the time was taken up by discussions on terrorism and 15% on eleven other issues. She insisted that Kashmir was briefly touched upon and Afghanistan was not discussed at all. On the other hand, Pakistani Foreign Secretary categorically stated that Kashmir was discussed "extensively" as it is the core issue that could not be handled in a dismissive manner and stated that Pakistan would continue supporting the movement politically and morally. Similarly, Pakistan's claim that Hafiz Saeed, who according to India is the mastermind of 26/11, was not discussed at all was rejected by India whose officials held that the unhindered freedom he enjoyed was an issue raised during the meeting.⁶

Apart from terrorism, India raised the issue of infiltration and ceasefire violations while Pakistan took up the issue of Balochistan and expressed concerns over information that India was trying to fuel trouble in the region. Lack of trust between the two countries limited the task of both Foreign Secretaries to simply reiterating their respective positions on issues of concern; there was indeed no consensus on a roadmap leading to resumption of the Composite Dialogue. The fact that India was in no mood to discuss issues that of great concern to Pakistan can be gauged through last-minute changes made in the visiting delegation when members from

the Interior and Water Power Ministries were dropped due to Indian insistence.⁷

Pakistan strongly advocated resumption of the Composite Dialogue since it was 'unfair, unrealistic and counter-productive'⁸ to allow the issue of terrorism to stall the process of improving relations. However, the Indian Foreign Minister responded that "the resumption of such a process would have to await the restoration of greater trust and confidence".⁹ The only positive outcome of these talks then has been a commitment to remaining in contact.

Yet even as there were factors that led to the Indian invitation, the decision to engage in talks with Pakistan met with severe criticism in India. All major political parties came down hard on the government, contending that the decision had been taken under US pressure. However, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh defended himself by saying that the decision was not sudden but rather a "calculated" one that had been reached after weighing all the costs and benefits.¹⁰ He further added that suspension of dialogue had not resulted in Islamabad's isolation as the international community continued to communicate with Pakistan; indeed it was always better to maintain communication since this reduced prospects of a "miscalculation".¹¹

While supporting the government, most analysts suggested that since India had finally decided to come to the negotiating table, any other terrorist act including the recent Kabul bombing should not be allowed to derail the process. Indian political and strategic analysts are strongly advocating the continuation of dialogue so that Pakistan's military can be denied any excuse for not fighting the Afghan Taliban. They argue that India has nothing to lose by talking to Pakistan but Pakistan would certainly be forced to take action against anti-India jihadi groups and the Afghan Taliban as a result of negotiations. Furthermore, it would help India to talk about its cultural and especially economic stakes in Afghanistan. It is also being advocated that India formulate strategies with clarity and ruthless self-interest and its policy towards Pakistan not be formed to suit American interests. India is vital for America to counter China in this region and this provides leverage that allows for Indian stand to be tough. Thus it should act accordingly regarding terrorism emanating from Pakistan; if terrorism remains a state policy, then the options of coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions or covert operations are available to India.

It seems that India feels that since Pakistan is facing multiple threats from terrorism as well as economic and political instabilities, it can take full advantage of the situation and press for a new and favourable framework

of talks. India has been hinting that Pakistan should place Kashmir on the backburner and try to resolve water issues through the Indus Basin Water Treaty. At the same time there needs to be a focus on commerce, economy and facilitation of trade for India to Afghanistan and beyond. Pakistan on the other hand has made it clear that it wants to see a resumption of the Composite Dialogue that was halted when the fifth round was underway. The contention is that terrorism alone cannot be made the topic of dialogue between the countries. A Foreign Office spokesperson noted that "if the Indians think so, it would not be an appropriate approach to restart the engagement". On his return from New Delhi, the Pakistani Foreign Secretary also made it clear that Pakistan would like to have good relations with India based on sovereign equality and mutual respect.¹² Recently, the Indian government has shown some interest in holding a second round of talks at the Foreign Secretary-level.¹³ However, it has to be kept in mind that talks without any structure are not likely to produce any substantial results.

Good neighbourly relations between India and Pakistan would benefit the entire South Asian region. The Composite Dialogue process may not have yielded spectacular breakthroughs but it did help to facilitate interaction at different levels which enabled the two countries to develop a better understanding of views on a range of issues. Discarding this framework for an ad hoc approach that suits only one side will prove to be unworkable, unproductive and unsustainable. As far as the menace of terrorism is concerned, this has become a global phenomenon and to fight it effectively the international community and particularly countries in South Asia need to come together. Suspending bilateral relations because of one terrorist act will only serve the purpose of forces that are inimical to peace. Regarding talks with Pakistan, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said that there was "no alternative" to dialogue in order to resolve issues which "divide us".¹⁴ This observation needs to be implemented on ground – and it needs to be implemented unconditionally if there is to be enduring peace in South Asia.

Notes & References

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 - ³ "Delhi for 'measured contact' with Islamabad", *The Nation*, January 30, 2010.
 - ⁴ "We must pick up the pieces : Bashir", *The Hindu*, February 26, 2010.
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- ⁶ "India rejects Pak claim that Saeed not discussed at FS talks", *Times of India*, March 7, 2010.
- ⁷ "Pakistan accepts India's demand on team change", *The News*, February 23, 2010.
- ⁸ "Unfair to let terrorism stall relations: Pak Foreign Secretary", *Indian Express*, February 26, 2010.
- ⁹ "Greater trust needed for composite dialogue with Pakistan: Krishna", *Times of India*, February 27, 2010.
- ¹⁰ "Talks with Pakistan a "Calculated move , no US nudge: PM", *Times of India*, March 6, 2010.
- ¹¹ "Not talking to Pak wont help us: PM", *Times of India*, March 6, 2010.
- ¹² "Dialogue: the only option", *Daily Times*, February 27, 2010.
- ¹³ "India keen on 2nd round of foreign secretary talks", *Times of India*, March 12, 2010.
- ¹⁴ "No alternative to dialogue with Pak: PM", *Times of India*, February 27, 2010.