

SHARM-EL-SHEIKH MEETING: AN ANALYSIS

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Pakistan-India relations have been a subject of immense importance not only for the two nuclear countries but also for the international community because of their implications for the region. These relations have seen various phases from peace at the border to deadly wars. The two countries have engaged in several rounds of talks in the name of the peace process, but the talks have been affected by various incidents, the recent one being the Mumbai attacks which led to a complete halt in the peace process. Following the Mumbai incident, a meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Zardari in Russia in June, months after the attack, was not able to bring any significant change to the situation. The meeting at Sharm-el-Sheikh on July 16, 2009, was held against this back drop.

On July 16, 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met with his Pakistani counterpart, Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani, on the sidelines of NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) Summit. The meeting concluded with the issuance of a joint statement that has been a subject of debate in the Indian and Pakistani political circles and the international media until recently. The statement was focused mainly on terror-related issues. The two much debated and controversial points of the statement are: (1) de-linking action on terrorism and composite dialogue process, and (2) the mention of Balochistan issue in the joint statement.

De-linking action on terrorism and composite dialogue process:

The most important point of the joint statement that gained much attention was the focus on resumption of dialogue and de-linking action on terrorism and composite dialogue process. In this regard, the joint statement clearly mentions: "Both Prime Ministers recognized that dialogue is the only way forward. Action on terrorism should not be linked to the Composite Dialogue process and these should not be bracketed."¹ This statement received completely different responses in both the countries as the respective parties interpreted the same in the way that suited their interests.

In Pakistan, the de-linking of action on terrorism from the composite dialogue was received as a positive development and a diplomatic success of Prime Minister Gilani and his team. In India, the statement created a stir.

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Dr. Manmohan Singh and the ruling party faced some serious criticism from the Opposition on this statement. The Opposition BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) even staged a walkout from parliament and dubbed the joint statement “surrender” by India.²

In clarifying the statement in Indian parliament, only one day after the meeting, the Indian prime minister said that de-linking the composite dialogue and action by Pakistan against terrorism “only strengthens our commitment that meaningful process of engagement cannot move forward unless and until Pakistan takes measures to control terrorism.” Dr. Singh said the formulation of the joint statement that “action on terrorism should not be linked” meant that Pakistan “cannot await other developments” before acting.³

This interpretation undoubtedly appeared to signal a reversal of the Sharm-el-Sheikh position. Thus, an entirely opposite interpretation of the statement by Dr. Manmohan Singh led to some serious reservations from the Pakistani politicians and media. In addition to that, some analysts have also raised concerns about the actual resumption of dialogue as no definite timeframe has been mentioned for its resumption. As noted by an Indian analyst, “What Dr. Singh is willing to offer is not immediate resumption of the composite dialogue, but only the possibility of this at a later date.”⁴

However, one important aspect of the Indian prime minister’s speech that showed his inclination to starting some sort of talks with Pakistan was his focus on the importance of dialogue between the two neighbours. “Unless we want to go to war with Pakistan, dialogue is the only way out,” he asserted at the end of his speech, “but we should do so on the basis of ‘trust but verify’.”⁵ Analyzing the statement and the interpretation of the statement from both sides, it seems that the two parties are interested in the resumption of some sort of dialogue, but that depends on the action taken by Pakistani authorities on the Mumbai attacks and against terrorists.

Mention of the Balochistan issue: a real diplomatic success?

Another point in the joint statement that created hype in the media was the mention of Balochistan. It reads, “Prime Minister Gilani mentioned that Pakistan has some information on threats in Balochistan and other areas.”⁶ Where Indian leadership faced severe criticism on the mention of Balochistan, the Pakistani politicians have presented it as a major achievement of the current Pakistani leadership. According to their view, the mention of Balochistan in the joint statement has resulted in the internationalization of the issue.

Absence of the 'K' word:

The Pakistani authorities were severely criticized by the media and politicians alike for the absence of any direct reference of Kashmir in the joint statement. The leadership has responded to this criticism by highlighting the fact that the joint statement addresses the Kashmir issue where it says that "India was ready to discuss all issues with Pakistan, including all outstanding issues."⁷

The America factor:

Despite Hillary Clinton's statement that "the United States did not pressure India to return to the negotiating table with Pakistan,"⁸ most analysts, politicians and diplomats have concluded that the joint statement shows that India had succumbed to international pressure. There is no denying the fact that the scheduled visit of Hillary Clinton just after the Sharm-el-Sheikh meeting had some impact on the statement. India cannot strain its relationship with America at this point of time because it wants to preserve its growing strategic ties with the United States.

The American interest in Pakistan-India peaceful relations in recent times has been that "a constructive engagement between India and Pakistan is critical to the success of the Barack Obama administration's Afpak strategy."⁹ American interest in the current peace between India and Pakistan flows out of the need of a focused attention of Pakistani military on the Western borders and its commitment with America on the war on terror without worrying about the security of the Eastern border. Thus, the role of America in having a direct impact on the joint statement released at Sharm-el-Sheikh cannot be ruled out.

Conclusion:

After the halt in the peace process with the Mumbai attacks and the unrewarding meeting between President Zardari and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Russia, the joint statement released at the end of the Sharm-el-Sheikh meeting seems to be a positive development in Pakistan-India relations. Leaving aside the controversies, the obvious positive outcome is the emphasis by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his address to parliament on the resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan. What remains to be seen is whether the Sharm-el-Sheikh meeting can actually prove to be a facilitator for the resumption of the peace process.

References

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 - ⁵ "A confident Manmohan opens space for flexible response", *The Hindu*, July 30, 2009.
 - ⁶ "India-Pakistan Joint Statement", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, op. cit.
 - ⁷ "India-Pakistan Joint Statement", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, July 16, 2009, op. cit.
 - ⁸ "No pressure was put on India: Hillary", *The Hindu*, July 18, 2009.
 - ⁹ S.D.Muni, "India and Pakistan: The Message from Sharm-el-Sheikh", ISAS Brief, p.4, July 22, 2009.