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Issue Brief

Pathankot: Don't let this be another Mumbai

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It needs to be reiterated at the outset that Pakistan stands alongside India and the regional countries in overcoming the menace of terrorism and violent extremism, be it within the borders of Pakistan, or outside them. No other country in South Asia has suffered the consequences of this menace more than Pakistan. The country has paid the price with the blood of its men, women and innocent children. Its resolve to root out the menace is evident in the operations that are being conducted against terrorist outfits, their infrastructure and financing under the on-going military operation Zarb-e-Azb and the National Action Plan.

The incident at Pathankot is indeed unfortunate, and Pakistan grieves for the lives that were lost. But what must not be lost is the opportunity for improving relations between the two estranged neighbors that has arisen out of the positive developments over the last two months which raised the hopes and expectations of the multitude in South Asia held hostage to the rivalry between Pakistan and India.

It is to the credit of both the countries that over two and a half decades have been dedicated by its leaders and officials to efforts in order to find a compromise approach for resolving the issues, including Kashmir, that divide them. That these efforts have so far been unable to achieve concrete results is beside the point. What is more relevant is the fact that these efforts have been able to produce a 'peace process' under the Composite Dialogue (CD) that began in May 1997, however unsteady, and that has resulted in putting together a structure of a dialogue process and some understanding. Unfortunately, this understanding has been marred by unforeseen incidents which have derailed the process several times. In 2004, the CD became organized, and an agreement on the fundamentals had seemed within reach when the process was suspended following the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008.

Before the 'peace process' got derailed in 2008, four rounds of serious discussions had taken place between Pakistan and India in order to try and resolve and achieve some agreement on eight baskets of issues: Peace and Security, including confidence-building measures (CBMs); Jammu and Kashmir; Siachen Glacier; Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation project; Sir Creek; Economic and Commercial Cooperation; Terrorism and Drug trafficking; and, Promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields including people-to-people contacts.

The seven years of vacillation since 2008 seemed over when Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi met at the sidelines of the Paris Climate Change Conference, followed by an ice breaker meeting between the national security advisors in Bangkok in November 2015. Hopes of the revival of the peace

process got a fillip at the 'Heart of Asia' conference in Islamabad on December 8, 2015, when the Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj in her separate meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and advisor on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz, proposed to restart the process under the new initiative of a 'Comprehensive Dialogue' on all the eight pillars of the composite dialogue including two additional components –humanitarian issues and religious tourism.

But as the New Year gets off, hopes of a renewed peace process seems to have been hijacked, once again, by the terrorist attack at the Indian air base in Pathankot on January 2, 2016, and the usual pointing of fingers at the involvement of Pakistan-based radical group. But while the government of Prime Minister Modi has not been quick to call off the talks after the attack, 'actionable intelligence' has been provided to Pakistan by the Indian External Affairs Ministry with a proviso that the talks between the foreign secretaries of the two countries scheduled for January 15, 2015 will be 'conditional' upon Pakistan taking 'prompt and decisive' action against the elements involved in the attack.

The decision by the high level civilian and military leadership in Pakistan on January 8, to extend full cooperation in bringing the culprits to justice and maintain liaison with the leadership in India regarding the probe of the terror attacks, is a judicious one. There should be no doubts that the Pakistani leadership is determined to press the fight against terrorists and work proactively with India in tracing the facilitators of the Pathankot attack. While India has neither confirmed nor cancelled the upcoming talks between the foreign secretaries, the Prime Minister's advisor on foreign affairs Sartaj Aziz has indicated that Pakistan is determined to abide by the schedule of the talks.

When Prime Minister Modi made his euphoric visit to Lahore on December 25, nobody was under any illusion that the 'peace process' was going to be an easy affair, and the Pathankot attack is a stark reminder of the challenges that lie ahead. However, the opportunity of meeting these challenges head-on lie in the continuation of the process rather than setting up conditions that will only work to the benefit those who want to sabotage the peace process.

Establishing facts is a time consuming process, and expecting overnight results for the foreign secretary talks to begin would be irrational. Too much time and efforts have already been expended on the bumpy road of the composite dialogue. The preferable approach would be to move forward with the talks in order to insulate the 'comprehensive dialogue' process from such incidences. It is essential therefore, that the foreign secretaries move as quickly as possible to set up a time table for the process to move forward in reaping the 'low-hanging fruits' of issues that had been almost decided such as the

visa regime, water issues, Sir Creek and confidence building measures on the Line of Control. Agreement on these issues would not only prove to detractors that this time around Pakistan and India are determined not to let terrorists - wherever they may be - stand in the way of peace and regional harmony by falling into a vitriol of accusations, but have the capacity of adopting a mature and cooperative narrative of peace in the region. "Putting the ball" in each other courts will just not work. Rooting out the menace of terrorism is not a game of tennis; it requires a more refined and robust approach.

In that, the secretary level talks on January 15 must not be seen lacking.