

ISAS Brief

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India-Pakistan Composite Dialogue: Towards A “Grand Reconciliation”?

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The message emanating from Islamabad after two days (20 and 21 May 2008) of meeting between Foreign Ministers and Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan to review the ‘composite dialogue’ and the ‘peace process’ between the two adversarial South Asian neighbours appears to be reassuring, at least on the face of it. Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi, assured that a “grand reconciliation in resolving all outstanding issues” was Pakistan’s promise, adding that “we are ready to solve all issues with self-respect and dignity for peace, stability and the development of the region”. Endorsing the sentiments of his hosts, the Indian Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherji, said, “I found a strong willingness and desire on Pakistani side towards full normalisation of relations... Secure, stable and prosperous India and Pakistan are in our mutual interest and good for our relations”.

One concrete basis of this optimism can be seen in the reiteration of the principal that while conflictual issues are being tackled, the two sides will continue to build on convergences and agreed areas of cooperation. The Indian side has been consistently pursuing this principal by repeatedly referring to the pattern of Sino-Indian normalisation process where the unresolved border dispute, which, at times, becomes acrimonious, has not been allowed to come in the way of advancing cooperation and understanding in the areas of trade, commerce, investments, cultural contacts and international issues of mutual concerns. The Pakistani side accepted that economic co-operation and conflictual issues, particularly the “core issue of Kashmir”, were mutually complementary and progress in one can positively influence the progress in another. Foreign Minister Qureshi said, “Core issues will remain but talks will continue. The Line of Control (LOC) ceasefire is still in place and the peace process is back on the track”. One can also interpret it negatively, meaning that if no progress is made on the Kashmir issue, economic cooperation and mutual confidence building will also suffer.

Confidence-Building Measures across the Line of Control

To keep the momentum of cooperation and confidence building, especially across the LOC, the two sides agreed to increase the frequency of the movement of people and goods across

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the border through rail, road and air. Accordingly, it was decided that the frequency of bus services should be increased from a fortnightly to a weekly basis, and to finalise modalities for ‘intra-Kashmir trade and truck services’. Working and expert groups to explore more confidence-building measures were also to be facilitated, including in the nuclear and conventional fields. The questions of trade volume and imbalance were also considered and it was agreed that railway official from the two sides will meet in June 2008 to remove technical difficulties experienced in freight movement. To expand economic engagement, the two sides agreed to open the branches of each others banks and agreed to work through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to promote South Asian regional cooperation and development. Both sides also agreed to seriously and sincerely address the humanitarian aspects of persons of one country detained in another. An agreement was signed in Islamabad during the meeting for consular access to such detainees. There will also be release of such detainees by both the countries. The liberalisation of the visa regime between the two countries was also reiterated. The review meeting also looked at the issues of territorial disputes in Siachen and Sir Creek. While there was satisfaction on the progress made on Sir Creek through joint surveys, exchanges of maps and discussion of technicalities, no significant progress was visible on the icy heights of Siachen, apart for a “commitment to seeking an early amicable solution”. Pakistan presented a new proposal on Siachen which will be considered and responded to by India.

The Kashmir Question

The main issue of contention between the two countries is Kashmir. A ceasefire agreement on the LOC has been in place since November 2003 and this agreement still holds generally, minor violations notwithstanding. However, there was a major violation of this agreement when missiles were fired from the Pakistani side on Indian security forces. India raised serious objections to this violation. The importance of ceasefire was accordingly reiterated in the Joint Statement issued after the Islamabad talks. Unfortunately, there was another similar instance of firing in the Poonch sector in Jammu and Kashmir within hours of the Pakistani assurances on ceasefire. The two sides will take up this question at the level of border security forces to ensure that such violations are not repeated. The Indian security forces are also of the view that, lately, there has been an increase in cross-border infiltration from the Pakistani side, as explosives and fake currency have been recovered in the border areas of Kashmir.

While India may accept the new Pakistani leaderships assurances and good intentions on the face value for the time being, its concerns on Kashmir arise on two counts – the changing tone of political stance of the new and democratic leadership in Pakistan on Kashmir and the approach towards Taliban and Islamic extremism of the post-election political and military establishments in Pakistan.

The new leadership, while projecting the vision of “grand reconciliation” has sharpened its rhetorical stance on Kashmir, calling it a “core” issue and bringing back the reference to United Nations Resolutions. On both these aspects, Pakistan’s President, Pervez Musharraf, had diluted the Pakistani position significantly. When asked to state the democratic government’s position on President Musharraf’s four point formula on Kashmir which included “self-governance” and “joint-supervision”, Foreign Minister Qureshi said, “The Kashmir issue should be addressed with the United Nations Resolution and taking into account the aspirations of the Kashmiri people, but we are open to all innovative ideas”. This is in conformity with the position of all the parties in the ruling coalition. It may be recalled

that Kashmir was not an electoral issue in Pakistan's recently held elections, but the leaders of both the major parties, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, had been urging Indian leaders not to deal with President Musharraf on the Kashmir question. Both had, however, also affirmed their support for peace process with India, but not under President Musharraf's leadership. Reacting to President Musharraf's formulation on Kashmir, Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani said, "They were half-baked things that did not have the mandate of Parliament". Sharif was of the same view in his response to an Indian news paper, saying, "This gentleman Musharraf announces very very important things off-the-cuff. He has the habit of taking decisions in a very casual manner...He is also erratic, a little impulsive. I don't agree on a lot of things with Mr Musharraf. But then one has to look into this. One will have to study this. We don't have to go by what Mr Musharraf says. Let us sit down and see how best we can resolve this issue".

A benign explanation of the new Pakistani leadership's return to a harder stance on Kashmir could be seen in the compulsions of domestic politics; to distinguish its position from that of President Musharraf and also to keep the extremist groups, who had joined them on anti-Musharraf platform, in good humour as they provided electoral support to the political groups in the new coalition.

Reinforcement of Islamic Extremists

However, the evolving dynamics of Pakistani politics and gradually building political buoyancy of the extremist forces need to be watched carefully. Some of the die-hard extremist leaders, such as Masood Azhar of Jaish-e-Mohammad, have been released and they are freely mobilising support for their cause among the Pakistani masses. There are reports of greater resource flows to Hizbul Mujahideen, and Lashkar-e-Toiba, a banned extremist formation since 2002, is preparing to appeal for legal relief. While opening talks with India on the peace process, Islamabad also invited the separatist Hurriyat Conference for talks in June 2008, and the Hurriyat Conference is asking for talks to be held in Jammu and Kashmir. Some of the Kashmiri extremists, such as Salahuddin and Islamic Jehadi groups in Pakistan, have been threatening the new democratic regime with agitation against any softening in its position on Kashmir, or even against any advance on peace process with India. Mohammad Yusuf Shah, who heads both the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and the United Jihad Council, declared in Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistan held Kashmir, in April 2008, that *jihad* in Kashmir will continue until the area is "liberated from Indian occupation".

Linked to the domestic political dynamics is the overall approach of the new establishment towards the global war on terror. There are increasing reports of the Pakistani army under its new leader General Kayani being soft on Taliban and Islamic extremist forces in the frontier areas. They are cutting out deals with the militant groups in order to buy piece in the frontier areas, much against the irritation and annoyance in Washington. The day India was concluding its Islamabad round of "Composite Dialogue", Pakistani government concluded a 15-point deal with the militants in Swat, ending operations launched in October 2007. Under the deal, troops will be withdrawn and Islamic *Sharia* law will be imposed in the Swat valley. Such deals seen in the context of reinforced *jihadi* activism and ceasefire violations in Kashmir are clear signs of rebuilding army-*jihadi* nexus that suffered a bit of a setback under President Musharraf's approach.

No one expected any major break-through at the fourth round of composite dialogue held in Islamabad. The Pakistani government is in a political flux, not only in relation to its evolving

approach towards the extremist groups but also on other issues of coalition survival. There are areas of ambivalence not only in the relationship between the coalition government and the President but also between the mainstream political parties and the new leadership in the army on critical issues of governance, as well as peace and security. The Indian government is also bracing itself for the elections next year and does not seem to be in a position to radically shift its stand on critical issues of relationship with Pakistan, be it Siachen or Kashmir. Under these circumstances, the best that can be done bilaterally is to keep the dialogue alive and going. This dialogue is extremely vulnerable to the reinforced confidence and activism of the militant groups in Pakistan, notwithstanding the resolve on the two sides that they will keep the dialogue insulated from acts of terrorism and extremism. It will take considerable time, effort and political courage on the part of the two countries to seriously work out the contours of the “Grand Reconciliation”.

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