

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

A small step forward

India and Pakistan have set up joint working groups to resolve outstanding issues.

Promising a major breakthrough in the much-awaited normalization of bilateral relations, the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan penned an agreement on June 23 in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, to set up eight joint working groups to address all "outstanding" and contentious issues, including the Kashmir dispute and cross-border terrorism and drug-trafficking. Special emphasis has also been given to efforts to maintain peace and security, including confidence-building measures.

The foreign secretaries agreed to also address Siachen, the Wullar barrage project, the Tulbul navigation project, Sir Creek, economic and commercial cooperation, and promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields. It was agreed that both sides would take "all possible steps to prevent hostile propaganda and provocative actions against each other."

Three days of deliberations were held in a congenial environment and followed closely by authorities and well-wishers, and the signing of the agreement has been hailed by both sides. Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was particularly elated, because India recognized for the first time that Kashmir is disputed. Delhi is equally happy that Islamabad has moved away from its oft-repeated demands of holding a plebiscite in Kashmir based on the 1949 UN Resolution to resolve the issue.

The decision to set up joint working groups, "a step in the right direction," as most observers here are tempted to call it, follows the pattern

of the process of normalization of the relations between India and China. In that case, too, a number of joint working groups were set up and, although the disputed border talks have continued to date without making much headway, concessions and accommodations by both countries in many areas have paved the way for greater trade and commerce, and provided a better understanding of mutual interests.

In taking the first step, the credit goes to the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, both of whom assumed their jobs less than six months ago. From the very outset, despite some vocal opposition within each country (more so in Pakistan than in India), they worked toward their stated objective of settling unresolved issues. It is also to their credit that the talks were held in a positive atmosphere. As Pakistan's President Farooq Leghari told the officers at the National Defense College in Islamabad, "There was no miracle, but there can be a change of heart."

The talks were undertaken at a time when both nations are trying hard to get out of the rut of slow economic growth and to overcome paralyzing weaknesses in their economic infrastructure. There is a wakening to the fact that India and Pakistan, once they settle the disputed issues, must participate in joint economic development, which will complement each other. The potential for India-Pakistan trade could grow to \$5 billion in less than three years. The present unofficial trade is close to \$1 billion.

India and Pakistan have to be the

economic linchpins in the southern tier of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, which passes through both countries to unite the Southeast Asian growth area to the energy-rich Iran and Central Asia, and beyond. The full-fledged development of the southern tier of the Land-Bridge depends upon strong cooperation between these two major countries, which together have a population of more than 1.1 billion people.

In addition, there are studies which indicate that an uninterrupted flow of natural gas, an important requirement if both India and Pakistan are to close the gap somewhat in their massive energy shortage, is perfectly viable through transnational pipelines from the Persian Gulf, once they settle their differences and work in their mutual economic interest to help each other.

It is evident that the majority of people in both countries realize the importance of normalizing relations. However, vested interests, particularly, in Pakistan, among the military hawks and the orthodox Sunni-Muslim groups under the control of the Jamaat-e-Islami, are against any accommodation with India. Just before the talks began, rumbles were heard, even from Pakistan's mainstream politicians, accusing the prime minister of a "sell-out" to India.

At the same time, mischief-makers from the West released reports just before and during the talks, about the unscheduled deployment of India's surface-to-surface missiles along the Pakistani border, and the discovery of a Chinese missile-manufacturing factory in Pakistan. Although it has now been acknowledged that the Indian missiles have not actually been deployed along the Pakistani borders, the attempt to muddy the waters prior to the talks was real. It is, however, to the credit of the mature minds participating in the talks, that they remained unswayed.