

First India-Pakistan Talks Yield Little

by Ramtanu Maitra

The first round of talks between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and visiting Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, held July 14-16 in the historic Indian city of Agra, failed to formulate an agenda on the basis of which future talks would progress. While both sides expressed disappointment, close observation suggests not all is lost. President Musharraf's invitation for Vajpayee to visit Islamabad, was accepted by the Indian premier, and a further meeting at the UN General Assembly session in New York, is likely.

Unfortunately, the media, particularly in Pakistan, have downgraded the summit as a failure and blamed New Delhi's intransigence. But the holding of the summit itself was an achievement. As recently as the Summer of 1999, Pakistan had escalated its irregular warfare against India by infiltrating a large number of militants and Pakistani Army regulars into the high mountains of Kargil in the Indian-held part of Kashmir. Although the Indians beat back the invaders, relations between the two touched their nadir. A few months later, Pakistan's Army Chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf pulled off a coup and arrested duly elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. It was evident then that it would be hard for India to accept General Musharraf, who had conducted the Kargil warfare. The Agra summit shows that India has not only accepted President Musharraf as Pakistan's legitimate head of state, but is willing and ready to discuss the normalization of India-Pakistan relations.

The Sticking Points

Long before leaving for Agra, President Musharraf and his foreign minister, Abdus Sattar, made statements to New Delhi, and to the Pakistani citizenry, that the summit concerned Kashmir, and no other issue. While Foreign Minister Sattar referred to Kashmir as the "only issue," to President Musharraf it was the "core issue." President Musharraf also met with militants and extremists active in Kashmir a week before his departure for the summit and obtained their approval for talks.

By contrast, India was eager to keep Kashmir as "another issue," but not the core issue that must be addressed for there to be normalization of relations. According to New Delhi, Kashmir is no longer only a territorial issue, as it was in 1947. Over the years, the Kashmir issue has become more complex, because of Pakistani intervention by arming, training, and using militants and *jihadis*. New Delhi, however, did not seem

to have a strategy on how to avoid Kashmir becoming the only subject of discussion.

Rather, India, under pressure from Pakistan's insistence to discuss Kashmir, put forward a proposal which suggests that New Delhi is willing to address Kashmir as the core issue, provided narcotics trafficking and cross-border terrorism, encouraged by Pakistan, are also discussed under the same agenda. However, no agreement could be reached on that, since those whom India considers "terrorists," are "freedom fighters" in Islamabad's dictionary.

Root of the Problem

In their ten-hour-long discussions at Agra, both sides were guided by "invisible hands." In Pakistan, extremists have a strong power base. The base extends inside the bureaucracy, Army, media and street-level agitators. It is a volatile coalition which cannot be ignored. In Agra, President Musharraf was held down by this distant force.

The Pakistani hard-liners, which include the extremists and *jihadis*, as well as the old anti-India warriors, believe that it is their moral and material support lent to the Kashmiri *jihadis* that has forced India to come to the discussion table.

In India, the perception is different. While it is acknowledged that the Kashmir insurgency is a drain on the national exchequer, the Indian economy is impacted nominally by Kashmir events. They also believe that the Pakistani Army, by investing heavily in Kashmir and anti-India campaigns, has bankrupted the nation. Moreover, Pakistan's unwise role in Afghanistan and Kashmir has made it a virtual pariah to the world community. According to these Indian opinion-makers, Pakistan, and Musharraf, are in dire need to resolve the Kashmir problem before it destroys Pakistan. At Agra, this line of thinking had acted as an "invisible hand" as well.

Beside those perceptions, other differences played a role at Agra. To Pakistan, Kashmir remains an unfinished agenda of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was one of the 565 princely states over which British paramountcy lapsed at the stroke of midnight on Aug. 15, 1947. Rulers of these princely states were given the option of joining either of the dominions—India or Pakistan. The ruler of J&K, Maharaja Hari Singh, did not join either, but wanted a "standstill agreement," pending his final decision.

A Muslim-majority state with a Hindu ruler, J&K was pressured by Pakistan, as well as India. Finally, when Pakistani tribesmen invaded J&K on Oct. 22, 1947, Hari Singh sought Indian help. As a conditionality, Hari Singh acceded to India on Oct. 26, 1947. The accession was never accepted by Pakistan, nor the United Nations. London took upon itself to promote a very strong movement seeking Kashmiri independence.

Pakistani hard-liners believe that since the Indian subcontinent was divided in 1947 based upon religion, no conceivable peace can be attained unless the Muslim-majority J&K



A sign of what did change despite the difficulties of the India-Pakistan summit: Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, responsible for the on-the-ground fighting in Indian-held Kashmir a few years ago, reviews an Indian Guard of Honor in New Delhi. Potentials for Eurasian economic cooperation provide hope for longer-term results.

becomes part of Pakistan. In India this view is strongly challenged. The partition of the subcontinent was brought about by a departing colonial power, Britain. That very basis of partitioning the country was proven wrong when Bangladesh (with a Muslim-majority, and formerly part of Pakistan) broke away from Pakistan with India's help. To the majority of Indians, to revert back to the distorted 1947 concept to solve the Kashmir imbroglio is simply unacceptable.

What To Expect Now

For President Musharraf, a certain level of success, mixed with the right dose of toughness at the summit would help him to legitimize his leadership at home. Therefore, it was not surprising that when he left for Islamabad he was crestfallen and visibly depressed. Foreign Minister Sattar has, however, reassured Islamabad reporters that the summit was not a failure, but "inconclusive."

The same compulsions drove the Indians say that all was not lost. India's External Affairs and Defense Minister Jaswant Singh said he was not disheartened by the outcome. The arrival of President Musharraf is a thread of peace and India will follow that thread as far as it goes.

The reason that both India and Pakistan are unwilling to label the summit as a failure, is that both parties realize the complexity of problems that encompass the resolution of Kashmir. Pakistan knows that Kashmir cannot be annexed militarily, nor is there any reason to believe that India will give up any significant part of the territory it holds now.

Equally relevant is yet another factor that may influence how India conducts the talks in the next round. Washington

had long been exerting pressure on both New Delhi and Islamabad to bring an end to the Kashmir conflict. There exists a veiled warning, or two. Washington has conveyed on many occasions that if the Kashmir situation continues to remain as it is, the United States would like to take over the mediator role to break the gridlock. Pakistan welcomes such intervention, but it is vehemently opposed in India. In addition, Washington has also implied that if India fails to resolve the Kashmir dispute, it would not be able to garner the American support in its yearning to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Then, of course, there are the Kashmiris themselves. President Musharraf, during his stay in Agra and prior to that, has made it clear that the "will of the people of Kashmir" must be given adequate attention. Pakistan also wants India to

commit to the participation of the Kashmiri groups in the talks at a certain point. New Delhi agreed reluctantly, worried about the likelihood that they will, in due course, demand a Kashmir independent of both nations—the brainchild of the British colonial era.

Immediate Threat

The fallout of the "inconclusive" talks could give rise to increased violence in Kashmir. Two powerful terrorist groups, Lashkar-e-Toiba and Hizbul Mujahideen, both based in Pakistan, have subsequently threatened to blow up Indian government installations. It is likely that they will be able to rev up fellow *jihadis* and Kashmiri militants to spread violence on the ground. According to Stephen Cohen, a Brookings Institution scholar who followed the subcontinent's armies for decades, the Pakistani hard-liners may see in this "inconclusive" summit, the sign to go for another Kargil-like adventure.

The hope, on the other hand, is that the ten-hour meeting is expected to have an impact on both leaders, and that the next round of talks will have a new level of confidence. Prior to the summit, President Musharraf, focused on Kashmir, rejected New Delhi's suggestions to adopt some confidence-building measures. India had suggested enhanced trade and commerce; opening up the pre-partition rail and road links between India and Pakistan; setting up checkpoints to facilitate freer travel between two Kashmiris; and the prospect of laying the gas pipeline from southern Iran to India, via Pakistan. Now that the ice has been broken, working on these may change the outcome of future talks.