

India-Pakistan Talks Cross First Big Hurdles

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Feb. 16-18 first round of talks involving top-level foreign office bureaucrats of India and Pakistan went off very well at Islamabad. Now, the ground has been set for problem-solving discussions to be held in May or June, soon after India's parliamentary elections are over, and a new government takes over for the next five years in New Delhi. Although the process that led to the holding of talks was made public only in early January, when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee arrived in Islamabad to address the South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SAARC) summit and to hold bilateral talks with the Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, both India and Pakistan had begun the actual process leading toward resolution of bilateral disputes months earlier.

At the summit conference itself, Vajpayee called for an end to "mutual suspicions and petty rivalries" that have "haunted" the South Asian region. "History can remind us, guide us, or warn us. It should not shackle us. We have to look forward now with a collective approach in mind," he emphasized. Both the Indian premier and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf called for beginning a "composite dialogue" on all bilateral disputes.

Winds of Change

The reports indicate that during the months preceding the Indian premier's arrival in Islamabad last January, India and Pakistan had begun a quiet channel at a very high level to bring the political enmity to an end, and pave the way for the solution of conflicts, including the five decade-old battle over the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The architect of this quiet diplomacy is India's National Security Adviser, the Prime Minister's Principal Secretary, Brajesh Mishra.

Mishra has also been deputized by Vajpayee to work out a framework with Beijing to resolve the India-China non-demarcated boundary issues. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in early February, Mishra said: "There have been some winds of change in South Asia, following a series of initiatives taken by our Prime Minister [Vajpayee] since April last year, and positive responses from Pakistan. At Islamabad last month, our Prime Minister and Pakistan's President Musharraf agreed to recommence the process of India-Pakistan dialogue in an atmosphere free from terrorism. . . .

There is no denying that improved India-Pakistan relations can transform the political and security landscape of South Asia. I must emphasize that the dialogue can be taken forward and sustained only if violence, hostility and terrorism are prevented."

The talks were the first peace effort by India and Pakistan in almost three years. Previous efforts stalled after India cut relations following a terror attack on its Parliament, which it blamed in part on Pakistan. Subsequent to that attack on Dec. 14, 2001, the two nuclear weapons nations came very close to an all-out war during the Winter, as India assembled about 700,000 troops facing 300,000 Pakistani troops along the international boundary and the disputed border areas. The troop assembly was completed in May 2002.

Following the withdrawal of troops, completed in December 2002, both countries began to seek a way to reduce hostilities. What delayed the process was Islamabad's unwillingness to abandon the more than decade-old support it had lent to the insurgents infiltrating into the Indian part of Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistan. The lack of political will of Islamabad at that point made it difficult for any serious dialogue to begin.

In this whole process, the Bush Administration had played a less-than-honorable role. State Department and Pentagon officials alike, who are keen to have both Pakistan and India as friends, had systematically misled New Delhi by claiming that they were in a position to force the Pakistani President to abandon the support to the insurgents; they claimed "total control" over Islamabad. It took New Delhi months to realize that Washington's promises were vacuous and not transparent. At a certain point last year, both India and Pakistan began to move despite this hindrance by U.S. claims and demands.

The most volatile of these disputes which they attacked, was the territorial claim over the state of Jammu and Kashmir by both countries. Since 1947, when the British colonials left the subcontinent, India and Pakistan have fought two wars over the territory. Over the years, it became evident that a military solution to the Kashmir issue is neither feasible, nor desired.

The dialogue to resolve the Kashmir dispute was also stuck in the mud on a 1949 UN resolution. A product of the cold war, the resolution called for a plebiscite to determine whether the Kashmiris, the majority of whom are Muslims, would like to be part of Pakistan or India, or to have an independent nation. After supporting the resolution briefly, India, realizing the danger, backed out and called for bilateral resolution of the dispute. In 1972, in what were known as the Shimla talks, both India and Pakistan had agreed to resolve all bilateral disputes through negotiations without resorting to military adventures.

The 1972 agreement, however, remained mostly a paper document. The breakthrough came late last year when Musharraf, during an interview with the BBC, made it clear that he

is not bound by the plebiscite clause. That was the signal needed by both nations to deal with the dispute bilaterally and not be manipulated from outside.

On Jan. 3 at the SAARC summit, Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, who had labored hard with his Pakistani counterpart Khurshed Mahmud Kasuri, told the journalists' meeting organized by the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA): "I have absolutely no hesitation in saying that the winds of change are blowing in the SAARC region. In Islamabad, I have a sense of history. Agreements have been reached on the issues that were considered not only as conflicts, but also perhaps impossible." What Sinha referred to was also true for the SAARC—which had remained moribund since its inception in 1987 because of the India-Pakistan hostilities.

India-China Relations Key

The most important motive force, although not the only one, for these winds of change was the rapid improvement in India-China relations. In recent months, India has widened its economic and political relationships with China, and the two are now involved in working out a framework to demarcate the India-China disputed border in the Himalayas. The non-demarcated border, a legacy of the British Raj, was earlier considered a non-resolvable dispute between India and China. Most Western analysts have said over the years that India-China relations could improve only up to a point, at which they would get stuck on the border issues. But since Vajpayee's visit to China last June, very high-level envoys were appointed by both nations to work out a framework to resolve the dispute. From all available reports, the progress that these two nations have made in this area is phenomenal.

With India and China willing to cooperate and expand economic and technological influences well beyond their geographical boundaries, there has been a sea-change in the attitude of the smaller nations in Southeast and South Asia towards both giants, and among themselves. In South Asia itself, India has worked out preferential trade deals with Sri Lanka and Nepal, and is in the process of doing so with Bangladesh. India has also brought together a cooperative grouping, BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand—Economic Cooperation), which embraces nations beyond South Asia.

India is also playing an active role in developing the infrastructure which would land-link the Indian subcontinent to Indo-China. That East-West route, once it finds its way through Pakistan, would link up the South China Sea to Iran and beyond to Europe.

With this fundamental change occurring, it became evident to Islamabad in particular that to sit out the process could lead to further weakening of Pakistan.

At the end of the three-day talks in Islamabad, a joint statement was issued on Feb. 18. It called for the following schedule of meetings:

- Foreign Secretaries would meet in May/June 2004 for talks on peace and security, including Confidence Building Measures (CBMs); and on Jammu and Kashmir.

- Talks on Siachen; Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project; Sir Creek; Terrorism and Drug-trafficking; and Economic and Commercial Cooperation would be held at the already agreed levels in July 2004.

It was also decided that prior to those, a series of technical level meetings would be held: between the Director General, Pakistan Rangers, and the Inspector General, Indian Border Security Force, in March/April 2004; expert-level talks on nuclear confidence building measures in the latter half of May 2004; and a meeting of the Committee on Drug-trafficking and Smuggling in June 2004.

Pakistan Puts End to Jihad

In India, the talks have gone down well with the masses, and the BJP is expected to improve its electoral standing within the ruling coalition. It seems that after the high tide of anti-Pakistan feeling in 1999, the Indian public wants the BJP to achieve some kind of permanent equation with Pakistan. It is unwise to speculate about what the Indian and Pakistani sides would "give" to achieve this equation. The other point of comfort is that Pakistan has virtually put an end to *jihad*, by declaring a ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC) separating the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. The *jihadi* camps are gone from Azad Kashmir (Pakistan-held part of Kashmir). Early this month, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes said Pakistan's government has taken "effective measures" against Islamic militant groups based in Pakistan, leading to a decline in incursions into Indian-controlled Kashmir.

It is also reported that the Indian troops on the Kishenganga-Neelum river boundary have retreated to allow Kashmiris to arrange family reunions across the stream. Pakistani observers claim that this was the biggest irritant that has been removed by the Indian side. Artillery shells in this part of Azad Kashmir had given rise to tragic civilian losses that Pakistan could hardly tolerate; it had responded by making it hot for the Indians on the other side of the LoC. Recently the Neelum Valley residents gave televised thanks to both governments for letting their lives return to normal.

Talks on a Kashmir bus service, and a possible train and bus route between Pakistan's southern Sindh province and India's northwestern Rajasthan state, are expected to occur on March 8-9 and March 29-30.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshed Mahmud Kasuri's Feb. 16 statement is of great significance. He said that while he was not imposing conditions, it was imperative for talks between India and Pakistan to proceed at a pace that would yield results, before President Musharraf gave up his military uniform by the end of the year. "The President is wearing two hats for a year, and advantage should be taken of that," he said.