

VIEW: After Thimphu

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It would help Afghanistan if India were able to convince Pakistan that its intentions in Afghanistan are not mala fide, just as it would help if Pakistan were to convince India that it is opposed to Afghanistan's being used for terrorist attacks on India and Indians

The announcement that the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan will meet in July is a welcome follow-up to the talks between Prime Ministers Singh and Gilani at the recent SAARC Summit in Thimphu. But it is still not certain whether they will match in substance the peace process that was put on the backburner in 2007 following the Laal Masjid violence.

Traditionally our foreign ministers meet when our prime ministers and/or leading political parties are hesitant to commit but wish to get a process started. There are of course exceptions, as when Swaran Singh met with his counterpart to map Siachen; but in the past 20 years the big breakthroughs have come when the two countries' leaders met, not when their foreign ministers did.

Much of what happens in July, in fact, will depend on what happens between now and then. The Indian Home Minister's June visit to Islamabad for the SAARC interior ministers' meeting will be the first test. If he is convinced by his Pakistani interlocutors that the Pakistani government will push ahead with the 26/11 prosecutions (and in his turn, updates the Pakistani government on progress in the Samjhauta prosecutions), then we can hope that the agenda for the July meeting will be substantive.

What would a substantive agenda include? The Pakistani government has said water will be high on their list of priority issues. There is little doubt that it is a critical concern for both countries, each of which suffers from growing demand on a resource that has not been conserved and is not managed. Each year we lose both water and land to our lack of water management policies, including even such measures as embanking our rivers. Water is an issue that calls for us to move from the zero-sum

approach of water-sharing disputes to the positive sum of cooperation on best practices for water conservation and regeneration.

But water is only one of the issues that need to be tackled. Security is another, from CBMs to allay Pakistani threat perception to infusing the Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism with life. One way to jump-start the mechanism is to set up a secretariat with full time staff deputed by the two countries' intelligence and law enforcement agencies. That would ensure the regular contact required for trust-building.

The best way to devise CBMs to allay threat perceptions would be through a direct military-to-military dialogue between the two countries' top brass. As far as I know, however, that has never happened. There are plenty of Track II India-Pakistan military to military dialogues, mostly third-party organised, but Track I has met mainly to negotiate, not to talk. Would it be so revolutionary for them to meet for open-ended talks to discuss misperceptions and/or security dilemmas? Why does it seem inconceivable?

Then there is Jammu and Kashmir. As Pakistan's former Foreign Minister Kasuri's recent article in the Times of India states, considerable progress was made in the official back channel during the Musharraf rule. The points that were agreed then were not new — they had, at prior and different times, been supported by former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif — but there is still little clarity of whether the present Pakistani government would wish to pick up where the back channel left off. It would be a pity if the progress made then was rolled back. It was considerable and deserves continuity, and it was broad brush with many elements still to be filled out. Picking up where it left off would not mean accepting what Musharraf negotiated — he was in any case one stop on the line of attempted peace initiatives — because it would entail further out-of-the-box thinking to turn into a comprehensive and lasting peace agreement.

It is also true that the priority for Kashmir today is for the parallel tracks of the peace process to be revived — India-Pakistan, India-Kashmiri nationalists (from all parts of the former state), Pakistan-Kashmiri nationalists — and for the discussion of a solution to be public (as well as privately in the back channel) and inclusive. Most importantly, it will have to be held in an atmosphere free of violence.

Finally, there is Afghanistan. While the tensions between India and Pakistan cannot be blamed for escalating insecurity in Afghanistan, they

are a contributing factor as the attacks on the Indian embassy and personnel in Kabul indicate. Clearly it would help Afghanistan if India were able to convince Pakistan that its intentions in Afghanistan are not mala fide, just as it would help if Pakistan were to convince India that it is opposed to Afghanistan's being used for terrorist attacks on India and Indians.

Back in 1942, when Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah wrote The Future of India's Constitution, he argued that the creation of a separate homeland for India's Muslims, Pakistan, would secure India's stability because the new state would act as a buffer against instability or security threats from Afghanistan. Ironically, 60 years later our two countries are bristling at each other there.

Afghanistan is unlikely to be on the July agenda, or anytime soon, though it is being discussed in Track II forums, both bilateral and trilateral. In any case the first priority is improving India-Pakistan relations, whose benefit will also be felt in Afghanistan. Meanwhile Track II can help pave the way.

The good news is that Indian and Pakistani civil society organisations, from think tanks to powerful media groups and industrial associations, are gearing up to support and lobby for peacemaking initiatives. In 1998-2000, a similar buildup of civil society support led the leaders of the two countries to initiate and then chart what would become the roadmap that subsequent leaders built upon in the years 2004-06.

Let us hope there is a similar groundswell for July.

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