

### To Talk or not to Talk?

The Mumbai tragedy of 26 November 2008 led to suspension of the talks between India and Pakistan. The talks had continued since January 2004 in a composite framework. In fact, it is common knowledge now that the back-channel was activated to involve the top leadership indirectly in the dialogue process. It was also true that important issues were discussed at a sufficiently higher level and rumours in media circles often pointed to some understanding on difficult issues like Sir Creek and Siachen. On issues like people-to-people contact, restoration of communication links and cross-LoC links, substantial progress was made too.

However, skeptics on both sides kept harping on lack of movement on the so-called 'core' issues and often lampooned the talks as a dialogue between two deaf persons, where the parties only repeated their individual positions and refused to hear the other with sympathy or sensitivity. There were some who would rather argue that the talks signified nothing and should better be called off. Against this backdrop, one must appreciate the patience and perseverance of the officials on both sides to at least keep the process alive in the face of grave provocations from the spoilers from across the border.

For instance, Mumbai was attacked in 2006. Serial bomb blasts became the order of the day in 2007 and 2008. The strategy of the spoilers was clear. They wanted to create havoc within India by raising a constituency of terror. As blasts rocked Delhi, Jaipur, Bangalore and Surat, and Pakistani links came to the fore, people in India started raising doubts about sincerity of Pakistani administration to contain the anti-India forces operating out of its soil and the usefulness of Indo-Pak talks.

The Mumbai carnage of 26 November 2008 completed this process of popular disillusionment in many ways. The fact that Pakistan went into a denial mode worsened the situation and the pressure of public opinion was so much that no government worth the name would have been able to withstand it and continued with the talks, especially when the Pakistani links were so pronounced in this case.

In the subsequent months, Pakistan was under tremendous pressure from the international community to own it up and bring the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack to justice. The pressure from the US and China was the most visible. After initial hesitation, offices of Lashkar-e-Taiba, the organization involved in the attack were sealed and its leaders apprehended. However, the process of investigation was far from sincere. Given the close links between pro-Kashmiri jihadis and the intelligence, it was certain that Pakistan would continue to drag its feet on the matter. The release of Hafiz Saeed in early June 2009, due to insufficient proof of his involvement in Mumbai attacks confirmed this trend.

There is a serious debate within India about the need to talk to Pakistan in this context. The nay sayers are on the ascendant and would argue that given Pakistan's visceral antipathy towards India, it is useless to expect such talks to yield any results. There is, however, a tiny constituency who would doubt Pakistan's sincerity, yet submit the following argument to engage Pakistan.

They would argue that the state of affairs in Pakistan has to be analysed in a realistic manner. There is a clear division of power in Islamabad between the civilian leadership and the military in Pakistan. The civilian leadership does not have the strength to formulate Pakistan's foreign and security policy. They admit that even if the civilian administration offers to talk, it would not be in a position to pursue it to

its logical conclusion in the face of a reluctant military constantly prompting it not to stray from Pakistan's frozen posture on majority of the issues. The fact that the civilian foreign minister was in Delhi talking peace, when the LeT terrorists went on rampage in Mumbai demonstrated that the efforts of the civilian administration to pursue peace with India were quietly undercut by elements within the military and secret service, who would rather like the process to collapse.

However, they would indicate that there is a critical mass emerging in Pakistan, especially in the political arena, who would like to make a break with the past and engage India. The pronouncements by Zardari, Gilani and Nawaz Sharif to go ahead with talks with India prove this point. Therefore, by suspending talks, India is only punishing the civilian leadership for acts they might not have committed. At the same time it is reinforcing a sense of insecurity in Pakistan which would further legitimize the hold of army on state power. It would be helpful, they argue, to stay out to the dialogic track and keep up the pressure on both the civilian leadership and the military establishment to stop sponsoring terror against India, through international community as well as talks.

The meeting between Manmohan Singh and Asif Ali Zardari in Yekaterinburg, Russia, on the sidelines of the SCO talks has taken place when the debate on "to talk, or not to talk" is still inconclusive. Zardari's promise to bring the terrorists to justice seems to have assuaged the feelings at certain levels and may lead to revival of contacts at a relatively higher level to re-evaluate the condition in which talks can proceed. If official commitment to rein in anti-India elements from Pakistan comes in through these talks, one would expect a resumption of the dialogue after almost a year, much to the consternation of the spoilers. But, in every likelihood, the spoilers will strike again. In that case, we must prepare ourselves to ward it off. Talks must go on, to prove the spoilers wrong and to strengthen the constituency of love and friendship within the two countries. There is hardly any alternative.