

ISA S Brief

No. 161 – 5 May 2010

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



India and Pakistan Meeting: Third Time Lucky?

Rajshree Jetly¹

Abstract

This paper discusses the recent meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gillani on the sidelines of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Bhutan. Although the talks did not produce any concrete results, it is an important step in reducing the mistrust that has bedevilled the Indo-Pak relations.

The Mumbai terrorist attack of November 2008 by militants allegedly based in Pakistan virtually froze all dialogue between India and Pakistan. Since then, there have been only three meetings between the states, the latest being the recent dialogue between Dr Manmohan Singh and Mr Gillani on the sidelines of the SAARC summit in Thimphu, Bhutan on 29 April 2010.

India and Pakistan have intractable legacy issues which have been exacerbated by the Mumbai terrorist attack. Both countries have clearly defined agendas that are difficult to reconcile and both countries have domestic constituencies that are unsympathetic to actions that suggest appeasement.² India's primary concern remains terrorism and cross-border infiltration for which it holds Pakistan responsible, directly or indirectly. Pakistan naturally takes a different view of

¹ Dr Rajshree Jetly is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be reached at isasrj@nus.edu.sg. The views reflected in the paper are those of the author and not of the institute.

² Earlier talks between the two leaders were held in Sharm-el-Sheikh in July 2009 on the sidelines of the Non Aligned Summit. The high point of these talks was India's decision to delink 'action on terrorism' from the Composite Dialogue, and include Baluchistan in the talks. These actions, however, led to an uproar in India.

this and prefers to have a broad-based dialogue on a range of matters that are relevant to its strategic interests, including Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek and sharing of water resources, amongst other things. New Delhi, since the Mumbai attack, has taken a hardline approach and refused to resume the Composite Dialogue with Pakistan unless the latter takes appropriate action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks. Islamabad has been pushing for the continuation of the Composite Dialogue on the grounds that it is itself a victim of terrorism and feels that the dialogue process should not fall victim to terrorist activities by non-state actors.

Significance of the Meeting

Despite these constraints, the recent meeting had a positive ring to it and was significant for a number of reasons. First, it reiterated the fact that the two countries, despite their differences, appreciated the need to keep the lines of communication open. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Mahmood Qureshi described the outcome as 'more than expected... a step in the right direction, a concrete development',³ while the Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao hailed the meeting as 'an exercise in mutual comprehension as lack of trust has impeded normalisation of relations'.⁴

Secondly, unlike the earlier meeting at the Foreign Secretaries' level in February 2010 which was vague and undefined in terms of what it sought to achieve, the recent meeting between the two Prime Ministers seemed to be more focused on some form of deliverables, or at least clear follow-up action. The Foreign Secretaries and Foreign Ministers on both sides were asked to 'identify reasons for the trust deficit', and work out a formula for future dialogue and confidence building.⁵ Work on this by the respective parties is expected to begin after the Indian Parliamentary session adjourns in early May 2010.

Thirdly, this meeting is significant because both parties are willing to engage each other despite the earlier stand-off where India had refused to continue the Composite Dialogue unless Pakistan acted on terrorism. On the other hand, Pakistan insisted that the dialogue should not be hijacked by the single issue of terrorism. Both countries have since decided to place greater emphasis on the 'essence' rather than format of future talks.

³ Rezaul H Laskar, 'Talks better than expected, trust deficit remains: Pak', *Indian Express* (2 May 2010), www.indianexpress.com/news/reducing-the-trust-deficit/613777/. Accessed on 2 May 2010.

⁴ Sandeep Dikshit, 'India and Pakistan put dialogue back on track', *The Hindu* (30 April 2010), www.hindu.com/2010/04/30/stories/2010043057230100.htm. Accessed on 30 April 2010.

⁵ Gilani, Singh hold 'very positive' talks, *Dawn* (29 April 2010), www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/04-gilani-singh-meet-thimpu-qs-09. Accessed on 30 April 2010.

Shift in India's Position

One question that this meeting raises is why India changed tack from refusing to engage with Pakistan unless Islamabad delivered some tangible progress on prosecuting the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks. There are a number of theories. First, recent constitutional developments under the 18th Amendment in Pakistan have appeared to shift some special powers away from the President to the Prime Minister, strengthening Pakistan's parliamentary democracy. It is in India's interest to support this and cultivate a good working relationship at the Prime Ministerial level. Secondly, there is a subtle pressure from the United States (US) for dialogue to continue between India and Pakistan as Washington wants regional stability to slowly reduce the US' commitment in the region, especially in Afghanistan. By agreeing to talk with Pakistan, India may gain some favour with the US, which could translate into more pressure on Pakistan to rein in the activities of militant organisations such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba.

India may also have less to fear in terms of domestic reaction to this meeting compared to the backlash following the dialogue at Sharm-el-Sheikh when India attempted to delink action on terrorism from the Composite Dialogue, and referred to Baluchistan as an issue. This time, India and Pakistan have played safe by not adhering to a specified format and not issuing any joint statement, which could have become controversial. This meeting seems to be a win-win for both sides as neither has had to lose face or concede anything for the sake of the other, but have opened the door to ongoing dialogue.

Way Forward

In the final analysis, the meeting has not produced anything tangible. But this is not surprising as there remains a level of mistrust between the two countries, particularly after the Mumbai attacks. This 'trust deficit' needs to be overcome by a fundamental shift in terms of how both countries perceive each other. The fact that the leaders of the two countries are talking again is a welcome development. This effort at rapprochement must be sustained. It is imperative that India and Pakistan keep an eye on the big picture and match rhetoric with credible action. Having suffered terrorist attacks to its Parliament in 2001 and its financial capital in 2008, patience is wearing thin amongst the Indian electorate, making it very difficult for its leaders to take a soft stance on terrorism.

Nevertheless, it is in neither country's interest to stop dialogue as this will only further estrange the two countries and provide opportunity for hardliners on both sides to gain an upper hand. The approach of the leaders at this meeting is promising as they seem to be more pragmatic in their approach by eschewing fanfare and putting in place measures to carry the dialogue forward.

While cynics may criticise these meetings as all talk and no action, given what is at stake, it may be that some talk is still better than no talk at all.

oooOOOooo