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India and Pakistan: The Message from Sharm-el-Sheikh

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Abstract

The Indo-Pak Joint Statement on 16 July 2009 marks a significant concession on India's part on two points – i) the delinking of action by Pakistan against perpetrators of the Mumbai terrorist attacks from the Indo-Pak Composite Dialogue; and ii) the inclusion of Balochistan in future Indo-Pak discussions. India's Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, has been criticised at home for the statement but his stand lies in the larger interest of improving relations with Pakistan and addressing the concerns of the international community (with respect to the war on global terror). In doing so, Dr Singh has not compromised any of India's basic interests.

Introduction

Ali Sardar Jafri, a renowned Indian Urdu poet who was dedicated to India-Pakistan peace, wrote, "*Guftgu band na ho baat se baat chale...*" (Continue talking, one word will lead to another). This is the crux of the message from Sharm-el-Sheikh where the Indian and Pakistan Prime Ministers met on the sidelines of the Non Aligned Movement Summit on 16 July 2009. In the Joint Statement issued after their talks, the two Prime Ministers committed themselves to fighting terrorism and cooperating in that fight, including sharing "real time, credible and actionable information on any future terrorist threats". Both of them considered "development and the elimination of poverty" as the real challenges before them and affirmed their "intention to promote regional cooperation".

Two Issues

Two issues that stood out in the Joint Statement were – i) the delinking of "action on terrorism" and "the Composite Dialogue process"; and ii) the inclusion of the "threats in Balochistan and other areas" in the bilateral talks. On both these issues, India has accommodated Pakistan's position. Following the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008, India stopped the Composite Dialogue process until Pakistan took "visible and credible" action to bring the perpetrators of that act to book and ensure that Pakistani territory was not used to launch terrorist activities against India. The delinking of the action on

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terrorism from the Composite Dialogue was a reversal of India's position in this respect. Similarly, for quite some time, Pakistan has been blaming India for supporting militancy in its western province of Balochistan and in the northwest region, for example, the Swat Valley where the Taliban have consolidated themselves. The inclusion of "threats in Balochistan and other areas" in the agenda for Indo-Pak talks at the behest of Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, by implication, underlined that India was answerable to Pakistan with regards to these threats.

While the Joint Statement has been received as a diplomatic victory in Pakistan and Prime Minister Gilani has been hailed a hero, in India, Prime Minister Singh has been blamed for capitulating to Pakistan and received widespread criticism for these compromises. He has come under fire for deviating from India's stated position on terrorism and the Composite Dialogue since Pakistan has not taken any 'credible and visible' action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks. On the contrary, the Pakistani courts let off the chief of Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, due to lack of sufficient evidence, and Pakistan's provincial Punjab government and the federal authorities have withdrawn the case filed against him.

The Indian opposition leader, L. K. Advani, described Dr Singh's position in the Joint Statement as a "big retreat by the government on its own stated position". Later, he saw "intense disquiet and concern among all thinking Indians, including a section of the Congress Party itself". Other political parties, both supporters and opponents of the ruling alliance, have disapproved of Prime Minister Singh's stand at Sharm-al-Sheikh. Even the Congress Party has indirectly expressed its unease with the Joint Statement. India's security agencies and defence establishments are particularly upset on the inclusion of Balochistan that gives advantage to Pakistan to counter India on the charge of Pakistan-sponsored "cross-border terrorism" and rubbish Balochistan's nationalist movement simply as foreign inspired terrorism.

In Perspective

For a proper assessment of the Joint Statement, the issues involved have to be looked at from a balanced perspective. To begin with, India has not given a diplomatic blank cheque to Pakistan either on the 'delinking' issue or the inclusion of Balochistan. Pakistan has already submitted a dossier on the action taken so far, howsoever inadequate and half-hearted, against the terrorists involved in the Mumbai attacks. The use of Pakistan's territory and the involvement of Pakistani nationals have been admitted, the role of Lashkar-e-Toiba has been acknowledged, five of the Lashkar operatives have been arrested and will be charge-sheeted, including the commander of the Mumbai attacks, Zakiur Rahman Lakhvi. The Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence Chief has been in consultation with the Indian High Commission officials in Islamabad on the action being taken in relation to the Mumbai case. To proceed further, Pakistan is seeking more information from India.

In no way does 'delinking' mean that the Composite Dialogue would continue irrespective of Pakistan not doing anything on the Mumbai case or letting similar attacks be repeated on India. The Joint Statement is a political document and not a legally-binding unconditional international commitment. Dr Singh told the reporters in Sharm-el-Sheikh that Prime Minister Gilani was keen to resume the Composite Dialogue 'here and now' "but I said that the dialogue cannot begin unless and until the terrorist acts of Mumbai are fully accounted for and the perpetrators are brought to book". Unless this happened, he stressed, "I cannot agree

and our public opinion will not agree”. This aspect was later elaborated at length in his statement in the Indian parliament, saying that even when the foreign secretaries of the two countries continue to talk, no substantive dialogue can take place if concrete action on Pakistan’s part is lacking. The idea of a ‘delink’ was incorporated to avoid a stalemate, “engage Pakistan” and deny it any excuse for not doing anything on the front of ‘cross-border terrorism’. In the latest twist to the interpretation of ‘delink’, India’s Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon has asserted that Pakistan has to continue its action on the terrorism front without waiting for the Composite Dialogue to start. Menon, however, accepted that the drafting of the Joint Statement might have left this aspect vague.

The inclusion of Balochistan in the agenda for bilateral talks certainly gives Pakistan a diplomatic advantage but, at the same time, enables India to raise the question of the suppression of human rights and freedom of the Baloch people by the Pakistan army, as Pakistan has been doing in Kashmir. It is ridiculous to assume that India can cut its own nose to spite its face by supporting the Taliban- and Al-Qaeda-led insurgency in Balochistan and “other areas” such as the Swat Valley. Not only India, but keen international observers have also denied repeatedly that India has any role in Balochistan. Therefore, it remains to be seen as to what credible evidence Pakistan can produce of Indian involvement in Balochistan and the frontier region.

There is also the question of the Congress Party-led government’s traditional approach towards Pakistan. The Congress Party regimes have generally not favoured breaking the dialogue to punish Pakistan for acts of hostility or terrorism. Former Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi knew of Pakistani involvement in the Punjab and Kashmir insurgencies but engagement with Pakistan continued. It was the same case with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao’s regime. Dialogue has been continued even during and after military hostilities initiated by Pakistan. India took a tough stand during the National Democratic Alliance government by mounting “Operation Parakram” and deploying full military strength on the borders with Pakistan but then what did it yield? “Parakram” was withdrawn unceremoniously and the credit for initiating the Composite Dialogue process in early 2004 was claimed by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Before the Mumbai attacks, there were several acts of terrorism in India where Pakistan’s involvement was suspected but no precipitate action was taken. The post-Mumbai decision to stall the Composite Dialogue was, in a way, a deviation from the traditional course of Congress Party-led regimes. It was driven not only by the horrendous nature of the Mumbai attacks but also by the exigency of the then-forthcoming parliamentary elections. In retrospect, it would have been in the interest of consistency for Dr Singh’s government (in the first United Progressive Alliance) to package its post-Mumbai anger and reaction against Pakistan without staking the Composite Dialogue. Those who are opposing ‘delinking’ now may not have any viable alternative to offer when military action against Pakistan is not a real and effective option. Between the stalemate and engagement, the latter is certainly a better response. It is clearly possible that this may still not yield any effective or satisfactory results in the long run but it keeps hopes up and secures wider international endorsement for India’s position.

Much would depend upon how Pakistan resolves its internal challenges and decides to relate to India. There surely exists a sharp and deep strategic divide within Pakistan on the India question. There are civil society groups, and political and business constituencies that want to build Pakistan’s future through a constructive engagement with India. However, there are

also those in Pakistan's security establishments and among extremist forces that do not see India in any other light except being an enemy state. *Jihadi* outfits have been created and nurtured by the latter's vested interests as confessed recently, even by Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari. Indian diplomacy must be geared to strengthening those forces in Pakistan that have stakes in cooperative relations with India and this is what the Sharm-el-Sheikh statement is aimed at. Pakistan has a civilian government and there is no harm in strengthening the civilian Prime Minister in the hope that he would be encouraged to nudge the security establishments towards a positive relationship with India. It is believed that Prime Minister Gilani, as compared to President Zardari, has a better rapport and more effective and amicable channels of communication with Pakistan's security establishments. It may be useful to recall that Prime Minister Gilani, in answer to the question of letting off Hafiz Saeed, confided in Dr Singh (as disclosed by him) that a "common consensus" within the Pakistani establishment was "*being evolved*" (emphasis added) for taking action against Saeed.

United States Pressures?

Prime Minister Singh was charged by some of the Indian political leaders and media analysts for conceding undue ground to Pakistan under pressure from the United States. There has been a stout denial by the United States, including by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who landed in India the day after the signing of the Joint Statement, that any pressure was exercised. There is, however, no denying the fact that a constructive engagement between India and Pakistan is critical to the success of the Barack Obama administration's Afpak strategy. Recall President Obama's remarks last month in his interview to the *Dawn* (Pakistan, 21 June 2009) made after the brief talks between Prime Minister Singh and President Zardari:

I believe that there are opportunities, maybe not starting with Kashmir but starting with other issues, that Pakistan and India can be in a dialogue together and over time to try to reduce tensions and find areas of common interest...And we want to be helpful in that process, but I don't think its appropriate for us to be the mediators in the process...we can't dictate to Pakistan or India how they should resolve their differences, but we know that both countries would prosper if those differences are resolved...I think dialogue is the best way to reduce tensions...

India and Pakistan are more than acutely aware of the United States position. There was considerable interest in the United States and all its allies fighting the war in Afghanistan that the India-Pakistan Prime Ministerial talks yielded positive results. The outcome of the Sharm-al-Sheikh meeting was accordingly welcomed by them.

On its own, India is keen to see that the United States wins the war on global terror in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Any prospects of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda victory in this war would spell a spectre of disaster for India's security and stability. Accordingly, by opening the way to re-engagement with Pakistan, India has not only responded to the United States expectations and concerns, but also created room for further American pressure on Pakistan to deepen its commitment in fighting terrorism. Refusing to restart the Composite Dialogue process with Pakistan would have put India at odds with the United States and marred the process of reinforcing Indo-US strategic partnership under the Obama administration.

Conclusion

On the whole, therefore, the initiative for the resumption of Composite Dialogue between India and Pakistan bodes well not only for their bilateral relations, but also for the overall regional security. India could easily avoid taking the Balochistan issue on board but it will still have the initiative to calibrate the tone and temper of this dialogue if Pakistan reverses or even refuses to move forward on the question of punishing the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks and curbing the activities of the so-called ‘non-state’ *jihadi* forces from its territory against India. Jafri had hoped that the talks, even if started in the darkness of night, may eventually lead up to the breakout of a bright and pleasant dawn. India and Pakistan have resolved at Sharm-al-Sheikh to get into a process that may, hopefully, lead them to breaking out into a dawn of mutual trust and peace in their relationship.

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