



From Bangkok to Islamabad: Rebuilding the Process of Dialogue

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The failure of the National Security Advisor (NSA) level dialogue in the month of September 2015 between India and Pakistan, when Pakistani NSA, Sartaj Aziz, invited Kashmiri separatist leaders to Delhi to meet them on the sidelines of the dialogue as well as demanded to keep Kashmir as the central focus of the dialogue, derailed the talks. When India demanded to stick to the agenda fixed in the Joint Agreement signed in Ufa, Russia, on August 22, 2015, Pakistan backtracked from attending the forum, saying that it was not able to attend the talks because of the preconditions set by India.¹ For the last three months, though both India and Pakistan did not get the opportunity or the proper platform to initiate the process of mending relations at a Foreign Secretary, Ministerial, NSA or Head of State level dialogue, but there were significant efforts at the diplomatic level to keep on the process of finding ways to create an atmosphere where dialogue can be re-initiated.

The re-initiation of dialogue started with PM Modi and PM Sharif meeting without forging a joint statement or agreement during the Paris Climate Change Summit on November 30, 2015. This was followed by four hours meeting of both the NSAs in Bangkok under a veil of secrecy from the media, which was made public with the issuance of a joint statement, mentioning that discussions between Ajit Doval and Lt. Gen. Nasser Khan Janjua covered peace and security, terrorism, Jammu and Kashmir and other issues, including tranquillity along the LoC.²

Though it was mentioned in the joint statement that the NSA level dialogue was in pursuance of the meeting that took place between PM Modi and PM Sharif in Paris, it is easily understandable that coordinating a NSA level dialogue in the presence of Foreign Secretaries in a neutral third country venue, like Bangkok, would not have been easy to organise in less than a week, keeping the entire event away from international as well as domestic media. For some time, the Pakistani leadership was being coerced by international actors to re-initiate the process of dialogue with Afghanistan and India, whereas the Indian leadership knew that the region can progress on the path of stability and development only if there was progress in the relations between India and Pakistan. The Foreign Offices of both the governments worked diligently in finding ways to re-initiate the process of dialogue. After discussing for four hours in Bangkok, both the parties came up with a five-line statement, which stated the manner in which the process of rapprochement was re-initiated and the way it should be taken further.³

India seems to re-adjust its strategic position by bringing more to the platter, while keeping terrorism as one of the core issues. Lt. Gen. Janjua, the present Pakistani NSA, a military man handpicked by the Pakistan Army as the National Security Adviser, will have the sanction of both the Army as well as the civilian government on the deliberations that he agrees to, which is extremely necessary to have any long standing effect in the dialogue process.

The Bangkok dialogue was a coordinated effort, keeping the media hype as well as political expectations of both the nations at the lowest and making a conducive atmosphere for both the officials to have a candid dialogue platform. It also kept Kashmiri separatist groups away from jeopardising the bilateral talks, which was witnessed before. It can also be noted that the presence of Syed Asif Ibrahim on the dialogue platform, Indian PM's Special envoy on "Countering Terrorism and Extremism," who keeps a tab on India's counter-terrorism operations and evolving terrorist threats to India, and who reports to Doval, clearly stated India's insistence on dealing with the issue of terrorism, which Pakistan had declined to discuss before.⁴

The dialogue between the two National Security Advisers was immediately followed by the Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to Islamabad for attending the fifth Heart of Asia Summit. The visit was covered extensively by both Indian and Pakistani media, and turned into one of the major focus of the Summit along with the presence of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

In the Heart of Asia Ministerial Meeting, Pakistan and India strengthened the commitment to re-initiate the dialogue process. Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, disclosed at a joint press conference with Sartaj Aziz: "Instead of composite dialogues now comprehensive dialogues will be held in which all outstanding issues will be discussed." All eight sectors of the composite dialogue would be part of the comprehensive bilateral dialogue and more things could be added to it. The 'Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue' will include discussions on peace and security, Jammu and Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, confidence building measures, the Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project, economic and commercial cooperation, counter-terrorism, narcotics control and humanitarian issues. It will also address people-to-people exchanges and religious tourism.⁵

While clarifying the stand of the government to the Indian Parliament, clearing the misconceptions that have grown after Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers' meeting in Paris, the NSA meeting in Bangkok and thereafter Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to Islamabad, Minister Swaraj stated that the government, from the beginning, remained committed to good neighbourly ties with Pakistan, which conformed to India's vision for peace and development in the region through deeper regional integration in South Asia. She noted that the continued estrangement of the two neighbours was a hurdle to the realization of such a vision. After the failure of the NSA meeting, which was agreed at Ufa, the Prime Ministers of both the countries decided to re-engage the process of building a conducive atmosphere for dialogue.⁶ Rejecting any "flip flop", the Minister asserted that the decision to re-start talks with Pakistan was based on "trust" and the intent would be to have an "uninterrupted" dialogue process despite provocations by the "saboteurs", an

apparent reference to terror groups. The current re-engagement of dialogue also strengthened a “sharp awareness” that the principal obstacles to the growth of ties, especially terrorism, would have to be clearly and directly addressed. There was a need to ‘bridge the gulf’, which exists between the two nations.⁷

In the latest arrangement, the level of talks on terror has been raised, as this issue will now be dealt with by the National Security Advisers (NSAs) instead of Foreign Secretaries as was decided earlier. The fact that NSAs of India and Pakistan met in Bangkok without any publicity does not mean any third country’s involvement, but it was only to take forward the Ufa process. Nothing has changed on the ground, and the government still strongly believes that terror and talks cannot go together. But the process of dialogue cannot be discarded entirely and the progress in dialogue is necessary for peace and terminating and re-initiating a dialogue process is an undeniable “part of diplomacy”.⁸

Vice President Hamid Ansari, while attending the Groundbreaking ceremony of the TAPI Gas Pipeline Project at Mary, Turkmenistan, on December 13, 2015, reiterated the sentiment that Pakistan’s support for TAPI reflected the interest in securing the economic future of the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a common venture that augurs well for the entire region and for the people of all the countries in the project.⁹

The peace process that was re-initiated got a significant boost with the sudden visit of Prime Minister Modi to Pakistan on December 25th 2015, after a hiatus of 11 years, when the last Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had visited Pakistan. While returning back from Kabul, Prime Minister Modi, along with a strong Indian delegation, which included NSA Ajit Doval, landed in Lahore, on an unofficial friendly visit, wishing Prime Minister Sharif on his birthday, as well as attending the wedding ceremony of Sharif’s granddaughter at his ancestral home in Raiwind. While holding a brief meeting during this visit, both the leaderships agreed that the two foreign secretaries of the countries would meet in mid January (January 15, 2016) in Islamabad.¹⁰

Pakistani analysts stated that after Lt. Gen. Janjua became the Pakistani National Security Advisor, the Pakistani Army has facilitated the dialogue process between India and Pakistan.¹¹ Pakistani officials and western diplomats in Islamabad said US officials also worked hard to convince Army Chief Raheel Sharif during his visit to Washington last month to support going back to the negotiating table.¹² The next meeting of Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi is expected to be held in Washington, as US president Barack Obama has invited both the leaders to the Nuclear Security Summit scheduled for March 31-April 4, 2016.¹³

Critics have stated that the Indian government has failed to keep its stand on terrorism intact, and has turned flexible and docile, bringing back issues that were on the back-burner and had lost the lustre, simmering in the background, like Sir Creek, Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project, in the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue process. But it needs to be understood that dialogue can only move ahead when all the issues of friction are put on the table for discussion. The present situation calls for more integration and finding ways to lessen the level of animosity between the two countries. India and Pakistan jointly has made advancements on multiple fronts: commitment to the Heart of Asia Summit, signing of the TAPI Pipeline agreement remain noteworthy. Both the leaderships also need to address issues like the rising threat of religious terrorism in the region, as well as the need to strengthen their bilateral relations, without the intervention of a third party, confronting the issues that vex the bilateral dialogue process. The effort that has been re-initiated must be strengthened and continued, if both the leaderships show commitment to the process of dialogue, making whole hearted attempts not to promote or sponsor activities that hamper the initiative taken by both the sides.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

Endnotes:

¹ Mateen Haider, "Pakistan Says Talks cannot be Held after India's Preconditions," *Dawn*, August 22, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1202149>.

² Joint Press Release on Meeting of National Security Advisers of India and Pakistan in Bangkok, December 06, 2015, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26127/Joint+Press+Release+on+meeting+of+National+Security+Advisers+of+India+and+Pakistan+in+Bangkok>.

³ Joint Press Release on Meeting of National Security Advisers of India and Pakistan in Bangkok, December 06, 2015, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26127/Joint+Press+Release+on+meeting+of+National+Security+Advisers+of+India+and+Pakistan+in+Bangkok>.

⁴ Sameer Patil, “Bangkok Breakthrough,” *Gateway House*, December 07, 2015, <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/bangkok-breakthrough/>.

⁵ M Fazal Elahi, “India-Pakistan Dialogue,” *Pakistan Observer*, December 14, 2015, <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=282368>; K Iqbal, “Our Interesting Neighbourhood,” *The Nation*, December 14, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/columns/14-Dec-2015/our-interesting-neighbourhood>.

⁶ Statement by the Minister of External Affairs and Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs (Shrimati Sushma Swaraj), Lok Sabha Debate, Sixteenth Lok Sabha, December 14 2015, <http://164.100.47.192/Loksabha/Debates/Synopsis.aspx>.

⁷ “Dialogues with Pak Beginning with Trust, Says Swaraj, Press Trust of India,” *News Nation*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.newsnation.in/article/103697-dialogues-pak-beginning-trust-swaraj.html>.

⁸ “Dialogues with Pak Beginning with Trust, Says Swaraj, Press Trust of India,” *News Nation*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.newsnation.in/article/103697-dialogues-pak-beginning-trust-swaraj.html>.

⁹ Address by Shri M. Hamid Ansari, Hon’ble Vice President of India at the Groundbreaking Ceremony of the TAPI Gas Pipeline Project at Mary, Turkmenistan, on December 13, 2015, <http://vicepresidentofindia.nic.in/contents.asp?id=557>.

¹⁰ Ali Zain, “Comprehensive Dialogue: India, Pakistan foreign secretaries to meet on January 15”, *Daily Pakistan*, December 26, 2015, <http://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/pakistan/comprehensive-dialogue-india-pakistan-foreign-secretaries-to-meet-on-january-15/>

¹¹ ‘Pakistan Army helped revive talks with India’, *Daily Times Pakistan*, December 27, 2015, <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/national/27-Dec-2015/pakistan-army-helped-revive-talks-with-india>

¹² “US convinced Pak army chief, Indian PM to hold talks”, *The New International*, December 27, 2015, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/84527-US-convinced-Pak-army-chief-Indian-PM-to-hold-talks>

¹³ “Next Nawaz-Modi meeting likely in Washington”, *The News International*, December 27, 2015, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/84316-Gen-Raheel-Sharif-to-visit-Kabul-on-Sunday>