India and Pakistan to pursue “composite dialogue”

Keith Jones
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The governments of India and Pakistan announced Tuesday that they will “commence the process” of a “composite dialogue” by holding talks in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad for three days beginning February 16.

Tuesday’s announcement arises from decisions taken earlier this month at meetings between Indian and Pakistani officials held on the sidelines of the South Asian Association for Regional Conference (SAARC) summit. On January 6, the day after an hour-long encounter between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistani dictator General Pervez Musharraf, the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan released a joint statement that pledged South Asia’s rival nuclear powers will hold comprehensive, bilateral negotiations.

Musharraf has termed that agreement “historic,” an assessment echoed by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

This is transparent hyperbole.

Since late November Pakistani and Indian military forces have adhered to a general ceasefire covering both the internationally-recognized border and the disputed territory of Kashmir. Islamabad and New Delhi have also taken various steps to facilitate cross-border travel and trade. Now the two governments are to begin negotiations with a view to settling their respective territorial claims and fostering increased economic and cultural ties. This, however, is far from the first time that India and Pakistan have proclaimed a new beginning to their relationship. To deal only with the most recent history, bilateral talks at the highest level collapsed in mutual recriminations in 1999 and again in the summer of 2001.

The principals in the coming negotiations, Musharraf and Vajpayee, are themselves identified with the most chauvinist and belligerent elements in their respective countries. Vajpayee’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the principal component of India’s National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government—is a Hindu supremacist party that has long maligned India’s Muslim minority as pro-Pakistani and repeatedly accused its political rivals of appeasing Islamabad. A key reason for Musharraf’s October 1999 coup was his belief that the then Prime Minster Nawaz Sharif had caved in to US pressure by ordering Pakistan’s armed forces to unilaterally cease an incursion into the Kargil region of Kashmir.

The geo-political rivalry between India and Pakistan dates back to their birth in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent. It has been perpetuated by their respective ruling classes as a means of channelling social tensions in a reactionary direction and combating the growth of a politically independent working class movement. Any comprehensive settlement would invariably encounter strong resistance from elements in the Indian and Pakistani economic and political elite—not least the military—whose interests are bound up with a continued state of belligerence.

This is not to say that Vajpayee and Musharraf are not serious, even anxious, to restructure the Indo-Pakistani relationship. Powerful elements in India’s and Pakistan’s political and business elites have concluded that the policy of brinkmanship, which in 1999 and even more menacingly in 2001-02 brought India and Pakistan to the verge of all-out war and a possible nuclear exchange, has produced ever-diminishing geo-political returns.

Both Vajpayee and Musharraf have invested considerable political capital in effecting a rapprochement.

The BJP-led NDA has signalled it intends to make its pursuit of “peace” with Pakistan a centrepiece of its coming re-election campaign. (Ironically, the NDA won its current majority in 1999 in a campaign that highlighted its decision to proclaim India a nuclear-armed state and its “victory” over Pakistan in the Kargil confrontation.) No sooner had Vajpayee returned from the SAARC summit, than the leaders of the BJP and then the NDA decided to advance the elections for the 14th Lok Sabha (India’s lower house of parliament) from this fall to the early spring.

Musharraf, for his part, has vowed to pursue negotiations with India even at the risk of further assassination attempts. In his maiden presidential speech to Pakistan’s National Assembly, Musharraf declared that “internal extremists”—i.e. the Islamic fundamentalist militias long patronized by the Pakistan’s military-security apparatus—not India, now constitute the greatest threat to the state.

Various compulsions, not least among them pressure from the US, lie behind the shift of important sections of the Indian and Pakistan ruling classes toward rapprochement.

Fearful of India’s emergence as a major destination for international investment and its growing geo-political partnership with Washington, many in Pakistan’s business and political elite argue it is better to seek a deal with New Delhi now, when Pakistan remains a valued ally of the Bush administration in its “war on terrorism,” than to risk having to deal with a stronger India in the future. Moreover, many share Musharraf’s view that the military’s promotion of Islamic fundamentalist extremists in Afghanistan and Kashmir has redounded against their interests, bringing Islamabad into conflict with Washington after September 11, 2001 and fuelling increasing sectarian strife within Pakistan itself. Exclaimed a top government official after the second of last month’s two assassination attempts on Musharraf, “They’ve done the ultimate. [The pro-Kashmir groups] have turned their guns against us.”

India’s elite, meanwhile has, been sharply critical of the BJP government’s costly, failed attempt to extract concessions from Islamabad by mobilizing the army in attack formation on the Pakistani

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border for ten months in 2001-02. Increasingly it is of the view that it can secure its claim to great power status by coupling a massive expansion in India's armed forces with a strategy of economic partnership with the six other South Asian states. A key decision of the SAARC summit, and one which figured in New Delhi's readiness to enter into a dialogue with Islamabad, was the finalizing of plans to create, over a 10 year-period beginning in 2006, a South Asian free trade zone. A former Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Dr. Tanwir Ahmed Khan, commented: "It looks to me that India is giving up its hegemonic designs over small neighbours and now wants to establish its economic domination in the region."

As for the Bush administration, it views developments in South Asia from the standpoint of its goal of securing the unchallenged military and economic dominance of the US in the 21st century. It is anxious to partner with India both because of its economic potential—Wall Street increasingly refers to it as the future "office of the world"—and because its can serve as a geo-political and military counterweight to China. Indeed, only a few days after the "breakthrough" in Indian-Pakistani relations at the SAARC summit, Bush announced what he termed the "next steps in strategic partnership" between India and US. These include greater cooperation in non-military nuclear activities and space exploration, an invitation to India to collaborate on missile defence, and a resumption of high technology trade.

At the same time, the US views Pakistan as pivotal to its occupation of Afghanistan, future ambitions elsewhere in oil-rich Central Asia, and its struggle against al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups.

During the Cold War, the US fanned the Indo-Pakistani conflict, so as to secure Pakistan as an anti-Soviet ally. (In fact it was at the US's behest that the Pakistan military-security establishment began its quarter-century involvement in promoting Islamic fundamentalist *jihadis* in Afghanistan.) Now, however, Washington wants to bring about a settlement between its traditional ally (Pakistan) and its new Indian ally, so as to secure its predatory interests and ambitions across Asia.

This process, however, risks embroiling Washington in myriad problems.

Musharraf's close ties with the US, for example, are making him a target for mounting popular opposition, not least because US-inspired IMF restructuring has spelt increasing economic hardship for Pakistan's impoverished masses. India, meanwhile, remains sensitive to any suggestion that the US will play the role of mediator in its negotiations with Pakistan.

For this reason, US officials have tended to downplay Washington's involvement in the recent Indo-Pakistan rapprochement. However, in a post-SAARC summit interview, Colin Powell boasted to *US News and World Report* about the US's role: "We have been working with the Indians and Pakistanis for almost two years, from a period of 'We're going to nuclear war this weekend' to, you know, this is a historic change. And so I think a lot of the seeds that were planted are now germinating and you'll (see) us harvesting crops."

Powell's statements prompted a curt Indian response. "The US has repeatedly offered to promote India-Pakistan dialogue," said an External Affairs spokesman. "However, on India-Pakistan bilateral issues there has been no scope for any third party role and it is not likely to be there in future either."

The fractious character of Indo-Pakistani relations is underscored by the January 6 joint statement. Although only six paragraphs or 153 words long, the statement's composition was a laborious exercise, involving six meetings between senior Indian and Pakistani officials. At one point it appeared that the statement and with it the plan for a resumption of comprehensive negotiations would founder over India's demand that Pakistan pledge not to allow its territory to be used to stage "terrorism." In the end, Pakistan relented, implicitly dropping its claim that the anti-Indian Kashmiri insurgents are freedom fighters, not terrorists. In return, Pakistan argues that it won India's first-ever acknowledgment that the status of Jammu and Kashmir, a princely state incorporated into the India Union in 1947 and the only Indian state with a Muslim majority, is a legitimate topic for bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan. Hitherto, India had insisted the Kashmir question was wholly an internal Indian matter.

The January 6 agreement left the timing, place and subject of the negotiations to be determined. Only after considerable wrangling was this week's agreement reached. Conforming to the pattern established at least since Pakistan announced a unilateral ceasefire to begin November 26, it was Islamabad that pressed for the negotiations to proceed quickly. India, meanwhile, continues to argue that meaningful negotiations will not succeed unless preceded by a long process of "confidence building measures." While India justifies this by claiming that haste could cause the negotiations to collapse, there is no question its attitude reflects its perception that Pakistan is the weaker party.

Whereas Islamabad wanted to involve political appointees in the negotiations from the start, New Delhi wanted to limit at least the first round of talks to just lower level officials. Ultimately it was agreed that the lower level officials would meet for two days. The countries' Foreign Secretaries will join the talks on the third day.

Even more tellingly, next month's negotiations will do no more than discuss the agenda for future talks. According to Amrit Baruah of the Chennai-based *Hindu*, "High-placed Government sources made it clear to this correspondent that it was not as if the 'composite dialogue' was commencing—but the 'process' of discussing the exact subjects that should be discussed as per the composite dialogue."

The staging of elections in India and formation of a new government means it is unlikely truly substantive negotiations with Pakistan will be feasible before June.

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