Amid mounting tensions

India and Pakistan agree to resume "composite dialogue"

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India and Pakistan—bitter rivals since the 1947 partition of South Asia—have agreed to resume the "composite dialogue" they initiated in early 2003 in the wake of a year-long war crisis that saw New Delhi amass a million troops in battle-formation along the Pakistan border and Islamabad issue thinly veiled threats of nuclear retaliation .

After meeting September 16 on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Havana, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf issued a joint statement in which they announced that they had directed their foreign secretaries to "resume the composite dialogue at the earliest possible" opportunity.

In July, Manmohan Singh officially put the dialogue on hold after charging, without providing any evidence, that Pakistan was complicit in the July 11 Mumbai train bombings which killed close to 200 people and injured hundreds more.

There is little reason to believe the resumption of the dialogue will produce any substantive movement by either side on the chief issues in dispute. These include, but are far from limited to, jurisdiction over the former princely-state of Kashmir. India and Pakistan have twice gone to war over Kashmir and since the late 1980s, the Indian-held part of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, has been the site of an insurgency, which has enjoyed Pakistan's political and logistical support and been brutally suppressed by Indian security forces.

Facing mounting popular and elite opposition at home, Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf is desperate for something he can hold up as proof that his alliance with the Bush administration is providing benefit to Pakistan in the form of US pressure on New Delhi to make concessions to Islamabad.

The Indian ruling class, for its part, is acutely aware of Musharraf's weakness and calculates that India's growing economic, military and geo-political clout will only cause the already substantial power-gap between the two states to grow in the years to come. It therefore continues to prevaricate on the Kashmir issue, while arguing that the strengthening of Indo-Pakistani economic and cultural ties and other "confidence-building" measures should not be "held hostage" to the Kashmir dispute.

Both Singh and Musharraf have repeatedly affirmed their support for a comprehensive settlement to the Indo-Pakistani dispute and fear the domestic and international fallout should the peace process unravel. Yet intense geo-political competition between the two states across the length and breadth of the subcontinent has never abated. Indeed there is much evidence to show that with peace process slowing, if not outright stalling, over the past 18 months, the geo-political rivalry has intensified, with India and Pakistan vying for influence in Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and each accusing the other of fomenting violence and terrorism within its borders.

Below are a few of the most spectacular of the charges and counter-charges leveled by Indian and Pakistani authorities in recent weeks.

* Addressing a meeting of state chief ministers in New Delhi on September 5, Singh, without directly naming Pakistan, said "Concern about the increasing activities of externally-inspired and -directed terrorist outfits in the country is justified. . . . Intelligence agencies warn of a further intensification of violent activities on their part, with the possibility of more 'fidayeen' [suicide] attacks."

* Pakistan officials have accused New Delhi of helping the anti-government insurgency in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province.

According to Pakistani media reports, New Delhi's foreign intelligence agency, RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), was blamed for the Balochistan insurgency earlier this month at a meeting chaired by Musharraf. *The News International* said it was disclosed at the meeting that RAW has "pumped huge money, into the province, transferred arms and ammunition via Kishan Garh into Dera Bugti, from various routes, all of which have now been sealed."

On September 4, Pakistani foreign office spokesperson Tasnim Aslam accused India of trying to destabilize Pakistan, adding that Afghan territory was being used for such activities. Subsequently Pakistani authorities clarified that they were not accusing the Afghan government of fomenting unrest in Pakistan, but India of using Afghanistan to funnel support to the Balochi rebels.

* The outgoing Pakistani High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Bashir Wali Mohammad, himself a retired head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, has accused RAW of carrying out the August 14 claymore mine attack on his motor convoy in Colombo.

Wali Mohammad escaped unhurt from the attack, but seven people, including four Sri Lankan military personnel charged with guarding him were killed.

Wali Mohammad has dismissed Colombo's claim that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were responsible for the attack, saying RAW targeted him because it is angry over the increasing military ties between Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Wali Mohammed accused RAW of "starting a proxy war in a third country by carrying out this lethal attack."

"The Indian High Commission in Colombo is quite disturbed with the fast-growing bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and Pakistan."

India has called the charges it was involved in the August 14 attack

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"preposterous" and "absurd." But it has made no secret of its concern over the dramatic increase in Pakistan's military cooperation with Sri Lanka, concerns that have been fanned by the repeated failure of negotiations to finalize an Indo-Sri Lankan defence pact.

B. Raman, a former top officer in RAW, wrote in the Indian news magazine *Outlook* on August 18, "The increasing involvement of Pakistan in the counter-insurgency operations against LTTE in Sri Lanka is a matter of serious concern from the point of view of India's national security."

In announcing the resumption of the composite dialogue, Singh and Musharraf said that they had agreed "to put in place an India-Pakistan anti-terrorism institutional mechanism to identify and implement counter-terrorism initiatives and investigations."

Given the intense hostility that exists between the two governments and especially their military-security establishments and given that the Indian elite is adamant that in the name of the "war on terrorism" Pakistan should cut off all support to the Kashmiri insurgency, such a mechanism has an air of unreality about it.

It appears to be largely a cosmetic gesture aimed at defusing the anti-Pakistani public mood India's government helped foment with its charge that Pakistan bore responsibility for the Mumbai terrorist atrocity, although it is possible the mechanism could facilitate some substantive Indo-Pakistani collaboration against Al Qaeda and a handful of other groups both governments view as antithetical to their interests.

In any event, the mechanism has already become a bone of contention between the two governments. After Singh said the mechanism would be a "test" for Pakistan, Musharraf declared that it would be a test for both countries. "An institutional arrangement," said Pakistan's military strongman, "is required for both sides ... [W]e also have some observations about interference in our country."

The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), meanwhile, has taken to the ramparts, accusing the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government of betraying India's national interests.

Yaswant Sinha, a BJP stalwart and former foreign minister, condemned the joint statement by Singh and Musharraf as "an unprecedented capitulation of India before Pakistan on the issue of cross-border terrorism." He added that "resumption of the Foreign Secretary-level talks between the two countries in the background of increased violence from Pakistan is not acceptable to us."

His remarks were subsequently echoed by former BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. "Whatever took place is not right," Vajpayee told a Hindu supremacist newspaper. The joint statement between Singh and Musharraf "is a conspiracy against India. Its implementation will jeopardize the situation in Jammu and Kashmir."

In its attack on the anti-terrorism mechanism, the BJP has been joined by sections of India's military-national security establishment.

India's BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government responded favorably in late 2002 and early 2003 to Musharraf's appeal for a rapprochement, after failing to cow Pakistan into submission with threats of war and coming under pressure from the Bush administration and Indian big business to seek an accommodation Pakistan.

But since falling from power in 2004, and in keeping with its attempts to destabilize the UPA government through all manner of provocations and chauvinist appeals, the Hindu supremacists have increasingly disparaged the peace process, although refraining from calling outright for it to be abandoned.

The UPA has frequently conciliated the Hindu right, especially when the latter has worked in tandem with, and articulated the views of, sections of the national-security establishment, such as in the post-Mumbai bombing push for the UPA government to publicly blame Pakistan.

The Bush administration has warmly welcomed the agreement to resume the composite dialogue. It is anxious for relations between India and Pakistan to be normalized, as political instability in South Asia is an obstacle to its plans to make the area, and especially India, a major site of US foreign investment and an anchor of US geo-political influence in Asia.

But the US's predatory ambitions are also an enormous destabilizing force, including in relations between South Asia's two nuclear powers.

Both India and Pakistan strongly favor the building of a pipeline to bring Iranian gas to South Asia, a project that would have huge economic benefits and also boost the peace process. Washington, however, is determined to thwart the project, as it cuts across its efforts to bully and weaken the Iranian regime.

Even more importantly, the US push to make India a linchpin of its plans to counter China's rise threaten to add a new explosive dimension to the six decades long Indo-Pakistani conflict.

To the dismay of the Pakistani elite, the Bush administration is seeking to cement a "global strategic partnership" with India by giving India a special status in the world nuclear regulatory regime. Under the Indo-US nuclear accord, India will gain access to foreign civilian nuclear technology and fuel, allowing it to devote the resources of its indigenous nuclear program to the building up its nuclear weapons program, and to lessen its dependence on foreign oil and gas imports.

After Musharraf's request for a similar deal was rebuffed by Washington, Pakistan turned to its longtime close ally China for assistance in expanding its own nuclear energy program.

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