



**DR MALEEHA LODHI**



The joint statement issued after the recent meeting between the foreign ministers of Pakistan and India was long on words and short on substance. It expressed the two ministers' "satisfaction on the holding of meetings" rather than report progress on the disputes that divide the two countries. This is because the mélange of bilateral interactions over the past year has not driven any outcomes on the contentious issues that comprise the eight-point agenda. Notwithstanding S. M. Krishna's terse and Hina Rabbani Khar's rambling remarks, the bonhomie on display at the joint press conference reflected the improved atmosphere of bilateral relations since talks resumed two years ago. But it did not mask the reality that process still outpaces outcomes in the renewed dialogue. Disputes and irritants remain in a state of deadlock. Despite incremental movement in other areas of the dialogue, the unresolved sources of tensions pose an ever-present risk of reversal in normalisation, if the past is any guide. The signing of an agreement to liberalise the visa regime is a step in the right direction. But it is a modest one, whose efficacy will be determined in its actual implementation. Moreover, despite a few categories, the new visa regime, replacing that in operation since 1974, remains as restrictive for the majority of applicants. It is fair to argue that given the start-stumble-stop pattern of Pakistan-India diplomatic engagement, completion of two rounds of the post-Mumbai dialogue on the full range of an agreed agenda counts for headway in an accident-prone relationship. Trade liberalisation has so far been the centerpiece of the two-year effort, with Pakistan poised to grant most-favoured nation (MFN) status to India by the end of 2012. This is expected to happen once three MOUs signed earlier this year become agreements. These aim to address some of Islamabad's concerns on India's non-tariff barriers and other restrictive practices.

Trade's contribution to improving relations is yet to be tested. But for trade liberalisation to build momentum, issues that are the source of enduring discord as well as recent irritants also have to be meaningfully addressed, because they can retard or undercut the evolution of economic ties. Caution is, therefore, warranted in assessing prospects for the normalisation process. This is because of a number of reasons. The most obvious is lack of headway on resolving key disputes including critical water issues. During Krishna's three-day trip the Pakistani side is believed to have conveyed to the visiting delegation that while Islamabad had shown flexibility in its approach to normalisation it had not yet found a matching response from Delhi. It was also pointed out that other than Kashmir even on disputes where agreement in principle was reached in the past, like Siachen, it remain unimplemented and had given way to a hardening in Delhi's position.

The discussion on terrorism laid bare the unmet expectations of both sides. From briefings given by the visiting delegation to the Indian media, terrorism formed Delhi's top priority in the talks. The Indian complaint was that Islamabad had not moved decisively against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack and needed to 'do more'. Pakistan agreed that the issue of terrorism was important but it needed to be addressed in a cooperative and patient way. In the Islamabad talks disagreements were not limited to the usual issues. For the first time the Indian foreign minister formally raised the issue of Gilgit-Baltistan, claiming that Pakistan's effort to convert the region into a de facto province was a matter of "serious concern". Pakistani officials reiterated their longstanding concerns about Indian activities directed from Afghanistan in Balochistan.

But the elephant in the room at the Islamabad talks was Afghanistan. With no formal discussion ever held on an issue that has poisoned relations in recent years, suspicions of each other's strategic intentions are likely to intensify rather than ease in the months ahead. As the 2014 deadline for an end to the American combat mission nears this could inject greater uncertainty in Pakistan-India relations. In the likely complex posturing by regional powers in post-Nato Afghanistan, Pakistan and India can again become locked in an action-reaction cycle. This could risk reversing the positive movement in their bilateral relations. Thus skirting around contentious issues far from strengthening prospects for normalisation can be counter-functional. Commercial ties will advance if they are accompanied by efforts to address the sources of instability in Pakistan-India relations. This is the lesson of history and dictum of common sense not an argument for imposing conditions on the peace process.

**Dr Maleeha Lodhi served as Pakistan's ambassador to the US and United Kingdom  
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