

Keeping India and Pakistan on track

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Inching toward peace

WASHINGTON More than a year ago, India extended a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan. Pakistan reciprocated and today, nine months later, the two sides are still talking. The nuclear adversaries, who have fought three wars and come dangerously close to two others, may be inching toward peace in South Asia.

In January, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then India's prime minister, and Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf, agreed to begin a "composite dialogue" after Musharraf pledged that Pakistan would not allow its territory to be used as a base for Islamic militants to mount attacks inside Kashmir.

Since then, transportation links and sports and cultural ties have been re-established. Embassies have returned to full diplomatic strength and consulates are to be reopened in Mumbai and Karachi. Earlier this month in New Delhi, the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers met and agreed to continue the cease-fire that has been in force since November along the Line of Control that separates the two countries' forces in Kashmir.

Beyond that, they agreed to create a new category of visas for tourists and discussed how their coast guards could cooperate. These are small steps, but as India's foreign minister, Natwar Singh, said, "Diplomacy provides hope, not salvation."

This week, at the United Nations General Assembly, Musharraf will have his first meeting with India's newly elected prime minister, Manmohan Singh, and both will see President George W. Bush. To move the peace process forward, the leaders of India and Pakistan need to signal their interest in resolving some of the issues in their "composite dialogue."

There are three specific matters ripe for settlement, each especially promising because of the strong humanitarian, military and economic messages their resolution would send.

First, the first-ever bus service should be started between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, the two capitals of divided Kashmir, allowing families to reunite after half a century of separation. This would dramatically demonstrate that the peace process could bring real humanitarian benefits for the people of Kashmir, who have suffered the most from the conflict. Disagreements between New Delhi and Islamabad on the issue of travel documents are blocking this important proposal. A push from the political leadership is needed to overcome these barriers.

Second, there should be a phased troop withdrawal and demilitarization of the Siachen glacier in northern Kashmir, where India and Pakistan have been waging a miniwar for the past two decades. The human and financial costs to both sides have been high, despite their recognition that the glacier holds little, if any, strategic value. Ten years ago India and Pakistan nearly reached an agreement to resolve the dispute. Musharraf and Singh should tell their officials, as a former Indian foreign secretary puts it, "to dust off the old ideas and take them forward."

Third, expanded trade and commerce would provide significant benefits to both India and Pakistan - and a solid foundation for a more normal relationship. The most dramatic measure would be an agreement to import natural gas to India through a pipeline that crosses Pakistan. The pipeline would provide Pakistan sizable royalties for transit fees and India would receive badly needed energy. The two countries' petroleum ministers will be meeting to consider this shortly.

Meanwhile, what role should the United States play? The answer is, more than the Bush administration has been willing to do.

An independent task force, co-sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Asia Society, commended the Bush administration for "swinging into action [in 2001 and 2002] whenever some egregious terrorist act threatened to spark a wider India-Pakistan conflict," but added that "this has been short-term crisis management, not part of any longer-term effort or strategy to help India and Pakistan manage their tensions, reduce the chances for nuclear war, and progress toward a modus vivendi."

At his meetings in New York with Musharraf and Singh, Bush should follow the task force recommendation to adopt a "more active, and more forward-leaning American approach" to help India and Pakistan sustain their nascent peace process.

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