



Track II: Full steam ahead

Manu Pubby Posted online: Friday , Feb 12, 2010 at 2351 hrs

New Delhi : The 26/11 attacks in Mumbai put a freeze on the bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan — till a few days back, when New Delhi proposed Foreign Secretary-level talks to be held later this month. On the other hand, the recent months have seen a sudden flurry of unofficial exchanges and dialogues between the two countries. Interestingly, most of these exchanges have the tacit backing of major western powers, some of which have high stakes in the region.

In the past few weeks alone, there have been at least eight conferences on reconciliation, involving politicians, former diplomats, retired military persons, jurists and prominent peaceniks from other walks of life. Many of these were sponsored by the US and other western countries including Canada and Germany.

The underlying effort of all these meetings was to find a way out of the impasse and resume official dialogue between the countries. The most recent was a meeting of the prominent Track II Balusa group in Lahore in the last week of January, that was attended among others by Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyer. Balusa is a US-backed initiative that was started by Shirin Tahir-Kheli, who was an adviser in the Bush administration.

“What Track II does is keep the flame of hope burning even when there is no effort on Track I. This freeze in the dialogue is making people wonder whether each country is actually acting in our own best interest,” said Aiyer.

The low-key meet, which included former foreign secretary Salman Haider and former IB director Ajit Doval, did not come up with a white paper but agreed that a resumption of dialogue was the need of the hour.

Besides the Lahore meet, a meeting on Indo-Pak peace was organised by the Capital-based Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR) last month. The Delhi-based centre is backed by the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) which is close to the country’s Free Democratic Party. However, CDR says that the funding goes back several years and is not specific to the meet.

This dialogue was also attended by prominent peaceniks including I A Rehman, founding member of the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, and two former Pakistani high commissioners to India. The private meeting, which was steered by historian Rajmohan Gandhi, focused on the need to increase people-to-people ties. "A statement will be issued later but there was general consensus on two things. One, that there should be more people-to-people contacts and second, that the governments should indeed resume the dialogue process," said Gandhi.

Experts also feel that the spurt in Track II talks is because of an increasing realisation that confrontation in the long run is not in the interest of either country.

"The lack of government-to-government contact is only one of the factors contributing to an acceleration in Track II. Another factor is increased realisation in both countries that the confrontation between India and Pakistan is extracting, from the people on both sides, a cost that is prohibitive and does not make sense either," said Rehman.

These efforts also touch on other sensitive issues like disarmament and nuclear confidence building measures between the countries. Funded by the US-based Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) group, the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) organised a trilateral dialogue between India, China and Pakistan at the Fudan University in Shanghai in August last year. This was the first major Track II meet where the three countries discussed the possibilities of nuclear rationalisation and disarmament.

"In Asia, between China, India and Pakistan, we have to try to agree on living with some kind of proportional disparity. This is the first time that the Chinese have talked about it," said Rear Admiral (retd) Raja Menon, who was part of the Indian delegation. The retired Admiral is also working with a Canadian-backed initiative for creating confidence building measures on the nuclear front between India and Pakistan.

The US-funded conference was followed by another three-day Indo-Pak Track II dialogue on Conflict Resolution and Peace Building by IPCS in Bangkok in October, touching on issues like common strategy for Afghanistan and expansion of Indo-Pak trade ties. This conference was funded by Ploughshares Fund, a San Francisco-based organisation that supports nuclear disarmament. It was attended among others by K C Singh, former secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, and Najmuddin A Sheikh, former foreign secretary, Pakistan.

The biggest Track II event was held earlier in the Capital on January 15 — a three-day conference involving leaders from India and Pakistan as well as separatist leaders from Kashmir that was organised by a consortium of organisations. While this was sponsored by a variety of organisations, a major contributor was the German Heinrich Böll, an independent organisation that is affiliated to the German Green Party.

The meet, which had over 20 leaders from Pakistan, came up with a "roadmap to peace" on issues ranging from climate change to reducing military spending. A follow-up of the conference is likely to be held in Lahore this March.

“We were one of the major contributors to the conference. We wanted to have an event where the civil society interacted. Our mission and mandate is to facilitate dialogue,” said Dr Michael Koeberlein, country director of the Heinrich Böll foundation, who informed that no outside funds were required to be raised for the conference.

Efforts on the cultural front — a round table meeting of SAARC countries was held in the Capital about a fortnight back — are also seen as part of the Track II initiative.

While the sudden spurt on the Track II circle has raised eyebrows, organisers and participants insist that it is more of a coincidence that so many conferences have been organised in the past few weeks.

“Mostly, it’s happenstance. It is not deliberate. On the one hand, the freeze in dialogue is making people wonder and on the other, there are signals coming from both sides that at the inter governmental level they want a way out of the current impasse,” said Iyer, adding that there has been no official interaction post these meetings.

Several factors, like availability of people, could be behind the bunching together of events, organisers feel. “There is no suddenness. These things are not that easily organised. They also depend on people’s availability,” said Gandhi.

The long break in formal dialogue also seems to have initiated the spurt in the Track II process. “People who are involved in the non-official process want to see better things happen between India and Pakistan. This (increase in informal interactions) indicates the sense that things have been stuck for too long and dialogue should be resumed,” said Haider.