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When Manmohan Singh comes to Islamabad

There are many issues but here are the top five on which progress is both necessary and, more importantly, possible.

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The coincidence between President Asif Ali Zardari's sprint to Delhi last week, and the \$10 million head-money on Hafiz Saeed announced by the US could be purely accidental. But this action certainly refocused Indian attention on the alleged Mumbai attack planner, who heads the pantheon of jihadi 'heroes' that now freely parades across Pakistan. In such circumstances, holding the olive branch before PM Manmohan Singh surely required guts. The scepticism to Zardari in India was, of course, predictable.

It is easy to pooh-pooh the visit. Mr Zardari is not a popular president or a clean one, and the PPP is unlikely to survive the elections scheduled in a few months from now. Plus, he wields no power on issues that India considers critical: nuclear weapons, Kashmir, and Afghanistan. Most importantly, he can do nothing to rein in the anti-India jihadist network, a matter that belongs squarely to the army's domain. Moving against Hafiz Saeed is not an option. Zardari cannot forget Memogate — which he somehow survived but Ambassador Husain Haqqani did not.

And yet, a weak and embattled government did something refreshingly good for the country. According to India, the MFN status for trade and related commercial activity is sure to be a game-changer that could bring peace and prosperity to the region. Ignoring the angry howls of the Difah-e-Pakistan crowd, the government for once listened to the country's majority — most Pakistanis do want trade with India even though they consider it a threat.

Still better news is that the Zardari-Singh joint communique says "practical, pragmatic" solutions will be sought for disputes. Showing his willingness to put Mumbai 2008 on the back-burner, Singh accepted Zardari's invitation to Islamabad. This is exactly the way it should be; frequent high-level meetings are the best confidence-building measures.

But what should the two sides talk about? Surely, there are many issues but here are the top five on which progress is both necessary and, more importantly, possible.

First, let both countries agree to immediately vacate the killing ice fields of Siachen. This insane war at 22,000 feet has claimed hundreds of lives on both sides; 138 Pakistani soldiers and civilian contractors are still being searched for after a mountain of snow crashed on them last week. Maintaining control over a system of Himalayan glaciers has come at a dreadful cost to human lives and resources, and has also irreversibly polluted a pristinely pure environment. But to what end? There are no minerals in Siachen; not even a blade of grass can grow there. This is just a stupid battle between two monster-sized national egos.

Second, let them talk about water — seriously. But please have the Pakistani side well-prepared for solid technical discussions. This means having real experts with facts at their fingertips. They must know about spillway design, sediment control, DSLs, drawdowns, sluicing, etc. I have seen too many duffers represent our side at Pakistan-India meetings where water inevitably comes up. Their lack of knowledge becomes painfully apparent and the Indians start smirking.

In water matters geography has favoured India; every upper riparian state can control outflows and India could be potentially unfair to Pakistan. But, although there are frequent allegations to this effect, are they really correct? The Indus Waters Treaty, negotiated in 1960, has so far kept matters on an even keel; neutral experts have adjudicated complaints received from Pakistan. Water has therefore not been a strong reason for war until now. But this stability may be drawing to an end because both countries — Pakistan more so than India — are becoming water stressed. Rising populations would strain resources even if the other country did not exist. Therefore, sensible and well-informed high-level discussions are critical.

Third, do away with the absurd and provocative daily flag ceremonies at Wagah. Instead, let the leaders talk about how ordinary people can travel more easily across the border. This is a natural right, and a step towards real peace. If you travel to the other side and see that people there have greater likeliness to you than anywhere else in the world, the urge to go to war diminishes. Yet, for a Pakistani to get an Indian visa, or an Indian to get a Pakistani one, is presently an ordeal.

Fourth, Pakistan and India have technical issues regarding trade and transit rights that need discussion. Although Pakistan has finally granted MFN status to India, the real dividend will come if non-tariff barriers are removed and bank transfers are allowed. There are estimates that Pakistan-India trade could rise to an awesome \$8 billion per year. To achieve this goal, the onus lies on India.

Fifth: let them talk about exchanging academics, both teachers and students, between the two countries. Pakistan is starved of good teachers in almost every field, especially at the higher levels of education. The Higher Education Commission's plan to bring in university teachers from overseas has flopped. A breakthrough is only possible if Indian teachers could be brought to Pakistan. Indians would find it easier to adapt to local ways and customs than others. Plus, they would have smaller salary expectations than most others. The huge pool of strong Indian candidates could be used to Pakistan's advantage — we could pick the best teachers and researchers, and those most likely to make a positive impact on our system.

The above list has two deliberate omissions. The first is terrorism, which will displease the Indian side. But this matter lies beyond what any elected national leader in Pakistan can do; basically it is for the Pakistan Army to rethink its goals. In all likelihood, change will only come when the internal costs of maintaining strategic jihadist assets become too large. The present informal truce is unlikely to last forever, and jihadists could be attacking their handlers once again in the not-too-distant future.

The second omission is Kashmir, which displeases the Pakistani side. But, given the tortured history of Pakistan-India conflict on this conflict, it is difficult to imagine that progress is possible. Pragmatism therefore requires keeping the conflict on the backburner instead of demanding an instant solution. For now, it is more important that Pakistan and India become normal neighbours and deal with their disputes reasonably.

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