



India and Pakistan

Sharm offensive Jul 16th 2009 From The Economist print edition

AS THE prime ministers of India and Pakistan prepared to air bilateral grievances at a meeting in Egypt on July 15th, Indian police issued a reminder of the most urgent of them—warning of a fresh terrorist threat in Mumbai, the Indian port-city devastated by Pakistani terrorists last November. That outrage caused India to withdraw from a promising four-year diplomatic effort to normalise relations between the two old rivals. This week's meeting between Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister, and Pakistan's Yusuf Raza Gilani, on the fringes of a summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Sharm el-Sheikh, was the first serious effort to talk about terms on which it can be restored.

Since Mumbai, India has demanded Pakistan bring to justice those responsible for the attack, in which 175 people died, and dismantle the networks of anti-Indian militancy that spawned them. Yet in recently declaring himself ready to meet Pakistan "more than halfway", Mr Singh sounded a more conciliatory note. As The Economist went to press, it seemed likely that, provided Pakistan prosecutes, in earnest, five alleged ringleaders of the attack (as on July 12th it said it would start doing this week), and if it gives further evidence of its seriousness in investigating the plot, India will agree to restart the peace process soon.

It is a sign of that process's former strength that both countries want this. A "composite dialogue" aimed at settling outstanding disputes which was launched in 2004 by India's then prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Pakistan's then generalissimo, Pervez Musharraf, the process brought the foes closer together than at any time in their violent history. They reached outline

agreements on how to settle three territorial disputes— including, though most tentatively, the status of divided Kashmir, over which they have fought three of their four wars.

And war became less likely—as demonstrated by India’s laudable restraint after Mumbai, when, against the wishes of many Indian commentators, it threatened Pakistan with no military reprisal. After an attack on the Indian parliament by Pakistani Islamists in 2001, by comparison, both sides rushed troops to their frontier, and raised a threat of nuclear war.

Yet the peace process will not recommence in its former hopeful place. In the latter part of 2006, it had promised a swift end to disputes over the Sir Creek estuary, which has prevented demarcation of the countries’ maritime border, and the Siachen glacier at the edge of the front-line that divides Kashmir. According to proposals put forward by Mr Musharraf, even that fault could have been mended: mainly by turning Kashmir’s front-line into a “soft border” and granting autonomy to Kashmiris either side of it. This was an historic recognition by Pakistan that India will not relinquish its richer portion of Kashmir. Yet India was reluctant to make any deal. And as Mr Musharraf became distracted by a losing battle to retain power, the peace process drifted.

Once resumed, the talks are likely to be dominated by how to combat terrorism, not solve Kashmir. Nor is India likely to welcome settlements on any other issue until Pakistan shows more signs of clamping down on the Islamist militants it once launched against India—including Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET), the banned group responsible for the Mumbai attack, whose founder and alleged leader, Hafiz Saeed, was released from house arrest in Punjab last month. Under Indian pressure, Pakistan’s government launched a half-hearted legal challenge to Mr Saeed’s release. But so long as it fails to charge him and his most senior lieutenants with any serious crime—such as killings carried out by LET when they were its undisputed bosses—they are likely to remain at large, preaching jihad against India.