

India, Pakistan to jointly fight terror, promote economic diplomacy

India and Pakistan Wednesday agreed to jointly combat terrorism and provide economic muscle to their relationship as they concluded the fourth round of their composite dialogue by signing an agreement on prisoners detained in each other's country and by agreeing to address all issues, including Jammu and Kashmir.

External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee concluded the review of the fourth round of composite dialogue with his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi on a positive note with both ministers underlining the commitment of their countries to strengthening their four-year-old peace process.

The two countries decided to strengthen their anti-terror mechanism and announced that its next meeting will be held in June ahead of the launch of the fifth round of composite dialogue in the middle of July.

'We reaffirm our determination not to let terrorism impede the peace process and to take all necessary steps to eliminate this scourge against humanity,' a joint statement said at the end of the talks.

The talks were held in 'friendly and constructive atmosphere' and stressed on confidence building measures.

The two sides agreed on a set of cross-Line of Control (LoC) confidence building measures that will enhance people-to-people contact and help to 'build on convergences and narrow down divergences on Kashmir.'

These included an increase in the frequency of the Muzaffarabad-Srinagar and Rawalkot-Poonch bus services from a fortnightly to a weekly basis and to finalise modalities for intra-Kashmir trade and truck services.

A meeting of the working group on cross-LoC confidence building measures would be convened within two months to implement other measures to expand cross-border travel between the peoples of the two countries.

'I am going back with a sense of satisfaction. We have to cover a long way. We are determined to cover that long distance and will ensure nothing stands in the way of improving our bilateral relations,' said Mukherjee at a joint press conference with Qureshi, an hour before he headed back to India after wrapping up his two-day visit to Pakistan.

This was the first formal engagement between the two countries at the ministerial level after a civilian government took charge in Islamabad.

'We are determined to resolve all outstanding issues, including Jammu and Kashmir,' Mukherjee said cautiously in response to Qureshi's call for 'grand reconciliation' on the Kashmir issue.

Even as India conveyed its concerns on cross-border terrorism in the aftermath of the May 13 serial bombings in Jaipur, Pakistan said it was as much a victim of terrorism and agreed to strengthen

their anti-terror mechanism, set up two years ago, so that such attacks can't derail the peace process.

'We ourselves are victim of the terrorism and our party is the latest example. We lost our party chief,' Qureshi said when asked if Pakistan has given any assurances over cross-border terrorism to India. He was referring to the Dec 27 assassination of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chief and former prime minister Benazir Bhutto to underscore that Pakistan was as much a victim of terror (as India).

Days after another incident of infiltration along the LoC by Pakistani militants, the two ministers spoke glowingly about an improvement in atmosphere and agreed to sustain the November 2003 ceasefire along the LoC.

To improve economic ties, and to smoothen the import of Pakistani cement into India, Indian and Pakistani officials will meet in June for resolving all technical issues relating to freight movement. They also agreed to facilitate the process of early opening of bank branches in the two countries.

The two sides also agreed to expedite the resolution of disputes over the Siachen glacier and Sir Creek marshland. Qureshi strongly pushed for speeding up the resolution of these 'doable' issues. Mukherjee agreed, but said on a more realistic note that although political will is there on both sides, it may take some more time to settle these disputes.

At the end of the talks, Mukherjee outlined the three pillars of India's engagement with Pakistan as: an atmosphere free from terrorism and violence, willingness to proceed with resolving all issues and developing a normal and cooperative relationship with the neighbouring country.

In a significant step, the two countries also decided to expand trade and investment between them, saying improved economic ties will not only be a confidence building measure but also lead to economic prosperity for both countries.

Asking Pakistan to develop 'a stake in each other's development,' Mukherjee said it will create a friendly atmosphere for resolving all issues.

'Stable, prosperous, and peaceful Pakistan and India are in our mutual interest,' Mukherjee said. Qureshi agreed, saying that 'progress on all segments of composite dialogue have to move in tandem.'

'It's not one at the cost of the other. One complements the other,' the two said in unison, underlining a convergence of views on pushing economic ties. India's official bilateral trade with Pakistan is estimated to be \$2 billion - but the unofficial trade via third countries is many times that figure.

'We shall have to expand the economic base and increase trade and investment by industrialists and businessmen of both sides. But for this to happen we have to provide a friendly atmosphere to make this possible,' Mukherjee stressed.

'The two great countries of South Asia can provide peace and stability to not only the region but to the peaceful development of the international community,' he added.

Citing the example of China, Mukherjee said that [New Delhi](#) and Beijing have not been able to

resolve their boundary issue but that did not prevent them from expanding their economic relationship. 'Bilateral trade has reached \$40 billion. Trade has grown so fast that we had to revise our target to \$60 billion by 2010,' he pointed out.

'The whole world is moving towards globalization of economic forces,' Mukherjee added.

Mukherjee who arrived here Tuesday, held meetings with the leaders of the ruling coalition parties - Asif Ali Zardari of the PPP, Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Asfandiyar Wali Khan of the Awami National Party. He also called on President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani.

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