

Pakistan walks a risky road

It was hailed as a breakthrough by both sides when India and Pakistan announced a new attempt to repair relations by restarting peace talks. The leaders of the two historic adversaries agreed to the talks this month, during the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Cuba.

Most of the reaction has focused on the prospects of an end to long-standing Indo-Pakistani tensions. But behind the headlines there lies a quite different motivator for the current drive for détente – regional Islamist extremism.

India has blamed Pakistan for many terrorist attacks on Indian soil, an accusation repeated in July after the Mumbai bombings that killed 180. In fact, however, most such groups no longer enjoy Islamabad's support. Many have even declared President Pervez Musharraf's regime an enemy – a fact not lost on the Indians. Thus, India and Pakistan have much to benefit from co-operating in counterterrorist activities and sharing intelligence.

That reality was reflected at this fourth meeting in two years of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. They agreed to resume the long-stalled peace talks and co-operate on fighting terrorism through a new joint agency.

"Terror is a threat to Pakistan, and it has been a threat to India for a long time," said Indian high commissioner to Pakistan Shivshankar Menon, after the Havana meeting. "We have not had a collective mechanism to deal with it. We have now."

The Pakistanis increasingly need help in this regard, since they find themselves in a worryingly vulnerable position, facing growing domestic separatism and terrorism. Also, they have to deal with the consequences of sharing a border with Afghanistan, and its Taleban resurgence. Complicating matters further, the United States is increasingly pressuring Pakistan to control the militants crossing the border to fight in Afghanistan.

But Islamabad has opted for quite a different strategy. On September 5, it signed a peace agreement with pro-Taleban militants in North Waziristan, a semi-autonomous tribal area bordering Afghanistan. Tribesmen promised to stop attacking the army and crossing the border to fight in Afghanistan. However, the vital issue

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of their harbouring foreign fighters – including al-Qaeda leaders – was not resolved.

There are thus fears that Pakistan has decided to appease the tribes, after seeing the total inability of its military to deal with them. Some observers believe the result will be the acceptance and legitimisation of the Taleban in Pakistan. According to Ismail Khan, a journalist with *Dawn* newspaper, government policy has become "what appears to be total capitulation to militants".

New Delhi shares such concerns, because increasing Islamist radicalism in Pakistan poses a potential long-term threat to Indian interests. Still, many Indians are not yet convinced that peace talks should be resumed when Pakistan is making deals with its radical Islamists. For example, former Indian high commissioner to Pakistan G. Parthasarathy called the news "a surrender of our position on terrorism".

Islamabad's approach to the tribes could make life easier for the Taleban in Afghanistan, and that has officials in Washington and Kabul asking uncomfortable questions.

And, in the same week, General Musharraf revealed that after 9/11, Pakistan was pressured to join the US "war on terror" by American threats to "bomb it back to the Stone Age" unless it complied. These are questions the Pakistanis will have to take seriously indeed.