

Report: Roundtable on “Improving India-Pakistan Relations” with a delegation of India Pakistan Soldiers’ Initiative for Peace (IPSIP) led by Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Moti Dhar on November 22, 2012.

Siachen, Sir Creek, and water issues will be resolved, Gen. Dhar

Aarish U. Khan

ISLAMABAD: “While the Kashmir issue is very complicated, I am confident that the other three issues: Siachen, Sir Creek, and water issues will be resolved soon between India and Pakistan,” said Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Moti Dhar, former Vice Chief of the Indian army. He was speaking at a roundtable organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) with India Pakistan Soldiers Initiative for Peace (IPSIP) here on Thursday. Gen. Dhar, who was heading the IPSIP delegation, said that there is a need of greater understanding between India and Pakistan over water issues. He said that Indians and Pakistanis need to keep it in mind that water resources are dwindling with the period of time and that both countries will not only have to resolve their water issues but will also have to evolve ways and means to effectively utilize the existing resource of water available to both the countries. “Water problems should not be turned into an emotional issue,” said Gen. Dhar.

Col. (Retd.) Gautam Das of the IPSIP delegation argued that Pakistan could unilaterally withdraw from Siachen if it was finding it difficult to sustain the war. He was of the view that the presence of the Indian troops on the Saltoro ridgeline would not pose a threat to Pakistan because of the difficulty of the terrain. Countering Col. Das’s arguments, Prof. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal of the School of Politics and International Relations at the Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) said that there are better ways of military disengagement in Siachen than a unilateral withdrawal of Pakistani troops, which he called impractical. He suggested learning from the Sino-Indian border disengagement. Another member of the IPSIP delegation from India, Col. (Retd.) A.R. Khan, was of the view that Siachen is a futile war and that courageous thinking is needed on both sides for resolving the conflict.

Dr. Tahir Amin, Director of the National Institute of Pakistan Studies at the QAU, argued that Pakistan always wanted to take a top-down approach in the dialogue with India for the resolution of the core issues, while India always wanted a bottom-up approach. The problem, he argued, arose when Pakistan would agree to Indian step-by-step bottom-up approach and would still not see any progress on the core issues, which he said, bred frustration in Pakistan. Agreeing with Dr. Amin, Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Talat Masood also called for progress on core issues such as Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, and water. He said that India should not hide behind excuses such as its domestic politics or overall political and security situation in Pakistan. “Both the countries will have to think how the fundamental change in thinking can be incentivized,” he asked. He was of the view that a fundamental shift in strategic thinking had already taken place in Pakistan and that the ball was in the Indian court now to reciprocate with progress.

Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Saleem Haider argued that people-to-people contacts would have to be coupled with government-to-government efforts at resolving core issues and normalization of relations. “India will have to realize that it cannot develop in isolation, it will have to take the regional countries along,” he said. President of IRS, Mr. Ashraf Azim, said that peace is the only option for India and Pakistan. He urged Indian Prime Minister to visit Pakistan despite all the domestic and bilateral issues. He was of the view that it would be an immense goodwill gesture on the part of the Indian Prime Minister towards

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Pakistan. He added that there are serious reservations in Pakistan about Indian sincerity towards normalization of relations with Pakistan. Gen. Dhar reiterated that the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, had decided not to come to Pakistan because his domestic position had grown weaker, which had diminished his capacity to sell any compromise with Pakistan back home.

Gen. Dhar argued that a stable and friendly Pakistan is in the interest of India. He was of the opinion that the revenge mindset against Pakistan in India has faded since the 1971 war. He maintained that the economic development-inspired new generation of India is more concerned about a better life, and argued that the governments can no longer afford to ignore the popular calls as was witnessed during the Anna Hazare Movement in India, the Arab Spring in the Middle-East, or the Lawyers’ Movement in Pakistan.

Gen. Dhar termed the Pakistani perception of Indian involvement in Balochistan for destabilization as completely baseless. Trying to allay Pakistan’s fears with respect to Indian involvement in Afghanistan, he said that India wanted a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan because it is a trade route to Central Asia. “India does not want to use Afghanistan to destabilize Pakistan,” said Gen. Dhar. Commenting on Sino-Indian relations, he said that China’s worries about India posing any maritime challenge to it were misplaced. He added that Sino-Indian trade had improved considerably over the past few years.

Brig. (Retd.) Jawahar Kaul called for greater media access between India and Pakistan, which he thought could lead to greater understanding between the people of the two countries. Countering him, Ms. Farhat Parveen of IRS argued that the media in both India and Pakistan had yet to show a level of maturity required for normalization of relations. She also expressed her dissatisfaction over the slow progress on core issues between India and Pakistan.

Other participants of the roundtable included: Maj. Gen. (Retd.) Raj Chanda, Maj. Gen. (Retd.) H.C. Sharma, Lt. Col. (Retd.) Prabhakar, Sqn. Ldr. (Retd.) Channa, and researchers from IRS.