

Be cautious in normalising ties with India: Pakistan advised

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Islamabad: Pakistan's former defence secretaries want the government to be extra cautious in pursuing a normalisation process with India, saying they do not see a major shift in New Delhi's policy on its ties with the country, Dawn reported on Friday.

Speaking at a seminar organised by the Strategic Vision Institute (SVI) on "Impasse in Pak-India ties" Implications for Regional Diplomacy and Strategic Stability™, former defence secretary retired Lt.General Asif Yasin Malik called for "open and extensive" debate within the country on its relations with India.

"There has to be a people-driven national vision, not a government-driven (one)," he added. The seminar was held on the third anniversary of the Islamabad-based think tank which specialises in security and strategic affairs.

Pakistan and India are on the verge of resuming their peace dialogue under the tag of "Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue™".

The talks were delayed by the Pathankot attack, but high-level contact between the two countries "which began with a meeting between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Summit in November last year, has given the impression of new momentum in bilateral ties, the report said.

However, Malik cautioned that no radical shift in ties was expected, although there could be minor improvement caused by expediencies of the international environment.

For Pakistan, "bending is not an option; either forward or backwards. We bend and we get a kick," Malik, who retired as defence secretary in 2014, said.

He recalled Prime Minister Modi's belligerent posture towards Pakistan during his election campaign, when he talked about making Pakistan irrelevant in a geo-political context at both the regional and national levels. He said India continued to play "cat and mouse" in ties with Pakistan.

Malik listed a number of measures he expected the government to undertake "both internally and externally" in order to effectively deal with the challenge posed by India: de-linking Pak-Afghan ties from the Pak-India relationship, safeguarding the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from sabotage, tackling political fissures over CPEC, pursuing water security more seriously, and appointing a full-time foreign minister.

Retired Lt. Gen Naeem Lodhi, another former defence secretary, echoed Malik when he noted that there was no "tente in sight".

In his view, the answer lay in the leadership of both countries ending the "blame game" and approaching the relationship with fresh and open minds.

"The imbalance of size and political clout highly in favour of India begs third party facilitation to veer these two nuclear powers away from confrontational mode. There seems to be no other option," he said.

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