

Promises to keep

The Centre's decision, at long last, to begin a political dialogue in Jammu & Kashmir is a step in the right direction. The appointment of an interlocutor to begin a "sustained dialogue" shows that the [Narendra Modi](#) government, earlier determined that there could be no talks so long as terrorism continued, has now realised that the situation in the state cannot be improved through force and firepower alone. Last year, as teenaged stone-pelters clashed daily with security forces on the streets, the government remained unmoved by the deaths and pellet gun blindings. But other than a daily body count on both sides, that approach did nothing to improve the situation. Terrorism, infiltration and militancy have continued despite the steady elimination of commanders and foot-soldiers of the Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar e Taiba and Jaish. There is no reason why containment of militancy or terrorism cannot go side by side with talks.

But for any dialogue to enjoy credibility in Kashmir, the minimum requirement is that the Centre must engage with the Hurriyat and its top leadership. So far there is no clear indication that the government plans to be inclusive of the separatists, against many of whom, separately, the National Investigation Agency has initiated investigations for alleged hawala operations and moneylaundering. Even the elected politicians of the Valley are clear that any process in Kashmir is set up for failure unless the separatist leadership is included in it. Talks with "all stakeholders" is what the BJP had agreed to in its "agenda for the alliance" with the PDP ahead of the formation of a coalition government in the state. And this is a promise that should be kept.

That the government appointed a former intelligence official to lead its first big initiative on Kashmir has been a bit of a dampener. A senior politician as the interlocutor would have given more confidence in Kashmir that the outreach was genuine, and carried more weight. But the appointment of Dineshwar Sharma, a former IB chief, may yet prove to be a boon. A low-profile interlocutor from whom expectations are low could well pull off big outcomes. Here, though, what is on the table will be as important as who will be seated around it. The term "legitimate aspirations", which Union Home Minister [Rajnath Singh](#) has used, is an indication of what the talks could be about. But the term can be as flexible as the government wishes. It would be best if the interlocutor goes in prepared for the maximum range of "legitimate", and without preconditions.

A hardline BJP government is paradoxically better placed than any Congress government to take a more liberal approach to talks. The timing of the initiative, ahead of two state elections, both important for the BJP, shows the government is prepared to take some political risk on the Kashmir front. This, by itself, is an encouraging sign.

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