**[Years of unwisdom](https://www.dawn.com/news/1810237/years-of-unwisdom)**

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MEMOIRS of retired Indian and Pakistani diplomats contain accounts of their postings to Islamabad and New Delhi, spent in professional pugilism and recollected in tranquillity.

Former Indian high commissioner Ajay Bisaria’s book Anger Management: The Troubled Diplomatic Relationship between India and Pakistan belongs to that genre. Its adversarial counterpart is former Pakistan HC Abdul Basit’s Hostility: A Diplomat’s Diary on Pakistan-India Relations.

Bisaria served in Islamabad for 20 months before being summarily ‘expelled’ in 2019 — the first among his 24 predecessors to suffer this indignity.

His book is the most comprehensive survey to date of the first seven years in a conflict that could well score a century. It is structured to cover seven decades and some years, from 1947 into 2023. It could carry the subtitle ‘Seven Pillars of Unwisdom’.

Bisaria notes that the chemistry between Indo-Pak leaders raised hopes.

According to him, three ideas “of identi­ty, territory, and security have populated scho­larship on the subcontinent”. They recur in his narrative. He tells us that “a lesson all In­­­dian envoys to Pakistan learn at some point or the other: Pakistan policy in India is dri­ven personally by India’s prime minister”.

Since independence, India has drawn its elected PMs from the same democratic pool, installed by popular vote. The PM’s authority is unequivocal, except in the instance of the paloo-tied control exercised by Sonia Gandhi during PM Manmohan Singh’s tenure. In contrast, leadership in Pakistan has passed from governors general, to nominated or self-appointed presidencies, to selected PMs.

Many of them have articulated their views on foreign policy. None has done so as poetically as the late PM A.B. Vajpayee: “The tools of diplomacy are words, eyes, and signs;/ Words, eyes, and signs; plus forks and knives;/ First you shake hands,/ Then wring them in repentance.”

Bisaria notes that personal chemistry between subcontinental leaders has often raised their people’s hopes: “Duos of leaders had held great promise of breakthroughs […]: Zia and Rajiv, Benazir and Rajiv, Sharif and Gujral, Sharif and Vajpayee, even Sharif and Modi, seemed to signal new phases of constructive engagement.”

He recalls: “In the 1960s, Rajeshwar Dayal managed to persuade Nehru to give Ayub Khan a chance, despite Nehru’s instinctive suspicion of the dictator. Natwar Singh became an advocate for Zia in the 1980s despite Mrs Gandhi’s aversion to him. Pakistan’s envoy Jehangir Qazi, through his quiet diplomacy with Advani, managed to get the Agra Summit of 2001 in place giving Musharraf a chance to make his case.”

He singles out Vajpayee for his “sincerity and balanced approach” towards Pakistan. Amongst Pakistani leaders, he thinks “Zia was perhaps the most consummate diplomat for Pakistan who tried to sweet-talk India while running a nuclear programme and a jihad” in India’s Punjab.

Bisaria remembers PM Singh’s remarks in 2006 that “borders cannot be redrawn, but we can work towards making them irrelevant [,] just lines on a map”. Singh’s sponsorship of the Satish Lambah/ Tariq Aziz plan came as close to a working formula for Indo-Pak ties as the two nations will ever reach. On taking over, PM Modi shelved it. In former HC Shivshankar Menon’s words, “the two countries fell into a repetitive pattern or dance of engagement and disruption”.

It is to Bisaria’s credit that, despite being “more of a Europe and Russia hand”, he ac­­cepted the Islamabad assignment with courage. He describes his life there as “never lo­­nely”. “Followed everywhere, wat­ched clo­sely, photographed on cell phones by swa­­rms of men in shalwar kameez, Indian diplomats become either peaceniks or hawks [:] seldom left in the middle.”

Bisaria offers his successor nine unequal pillars of wisdom: cross-border security, coincidence of leadership, safe diplomacy, the role of global forces and multilateral institutions, aspirations of the people, quarantining territorial disagreements, accepting Pakistan’s volatile structure of governance, minority is­­­sues and economic aspects of the relationship.

Peering into August 2047, when India and Pakistan will celebrate a centenary of independence from each other, Bisaria sees three scenarios: “Business as usual; conditional optimism; and conditional pessimism.”

Those who recall the struggles over Nor­t­hern Ireland may remember the response of the then British PM John Major when he was asked what his solution for the Irish qu­­estion was: “We can do one of three things. We can go backwards, or stay where we are. Neither is a policy. Or we can go forward.”

By the end of February, there should be a new government (conceivably led by Nawaz Sharif) in Islamabad. By June 2024, predictably, Narendra Modi will have returned to serve a third term. In which direction will they take us: backwards, mired in history, or forward?

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