**Exercising for peace**

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The recently concluded military exercises held in Russia under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was the first time that the military forces of India and Pakistan participated in jointly conducted exercises.

The multi-nation drills dubbed as ‘Peace Mission 2018’ were conducted as part of the counter-terrorism war games among member countries to deal with the growing challenges of terrorism and extremism. These drills were the first for India and Pakistan since becoming full members of the SCO in 2017.

Prior to the exercise, an Indian army spokesman, Col Aman Anand, described the exercises as an “opportunity to the armed forces of SCO nations to train in counter-terrorism operations in an urban scenario in a multi-national and joint environment”. Similar sentiment was expressed by the Indian commander of the SCO contingent, Brigadier Vikas Lakhera, who said India wanted friendly terms with all the countries participating in the exercise, which include China, Pakistan and Russia among others.

The six-day drills brought together 200 Indian and 110 Pakistani military personnel and reached a new milestone, though symbolic, in military-to-military cooperation. A few weeks earlier, Pakistan’s military chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa had prescribed bilateral cooperative relationship as one of Pakistan’s ways to achieve peace. He was quoted in a report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a British defence and security think tank that receives funding from the British government.

Despite being at loggerheads for over seven decades through open hostile confrontations and numerous covert and antagonistic missions, the two armies have worked together in several international peacekeeping missions under the UN. As part of the leading troop contributing nations to the UN peace missions, the two forces have worked together in nearly 30 different peace missions. The SCO-conducted ‘Peace Mission 2018’ has taken this cooperation to the next level, and has created hope that interaction between the two forces could perhaps ease the current phase of tensions and lead to some sort of cooperation and peace at the borders.

At the end of the SCO drill, it was heart-warming to see a short video of the soldiers of the two countries freely mingling and dancing together to some Bollywood and Punjabi tunes, an extremely rare sight. This momentarily arrested the mutual revulsion and animosity that so often, and so very readily, plays out at the Line of Control, claiming precious lives – military and civilian – on both sides.

The ‘SCO dance’ offers a faint hope that despite politics of hatred hanging thick in the air and mutual suspicion, there is a possibility of breaching the toxic divide, at least at a personal level, even with the aid of seemingly mundane activities. This also generates some optimism that despite the divisive rhetoric of politicians and media, particularly from India, the people of the two countries, let alone the competing armies, have a strong capacity to form mutual bonds of affection and cordiality.

Peace between India and Pakistan is the only constructive engagement that can foster socio-political stability through sustained economic growth and cooperation. Besides easing tensions, it is the single most important prescription for effectively challenging the home-grown extremists on both sides, and the nationalist-driven violence. Imran Khan, the new prime minister of Pakistan, has been pretty clear on his vision of Naya Pakistan vis-a-vis its relationship with neighbouring countries.

Even before he was sworn as the new head of the government, Khan spoke candidly and in detail about his vision to improve the relationship with India, and the need to find a judicious solution to the Kashmir issue through talks, and increasing trade and people-to-people contacts between the two nations. He reiterated these ideas during his meeting with Indian envoy Ajay Bisaria and called for the resumption of dialogue on all outstanding issues, including Kashmir.

In his 30-minute meeting with Bisaria, Khan also hoped that the stalled Saarc Summit would soon be held in Islamabad, and referred also to the growing human rights violations in Kashmir. In response, Bisaria highlighted “India’s concerns about terrorism and cross-border infiltration.”

In his victory speech after the elections, Khan suggested a simple yet effective case for improvement of relations with India. “We want to improve our relations with India if their leadership also wants it. This blame-game that whatever goes wrong in Pakistan is because of India and vice versa brings us back to square one.” He described the current stalemate in the situation as “detrimental to the subcontinent” and rightly pointed out that the mutual blame-game was not conducive for growth.

Although he displayed reasoned disappointment at the right-wing Indian media for treating him like a Bollywood villain, PM Khan showed determination to start a process of detente. “If they take one step towards us, we will take two, but at least we need a start”, he said in his first public address after winning the elections.

Sadly, at present, India seems to have no appetite to reciprocate any sensible and realistic peace overtures. Rather, even symbolic gestures of peace such as the recent meeting between the cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu’s brief talk and hug with General Qamar Bajwa are painted as treasonous, with mainstream Indian politicians and opinion-makers all hauling Sidhu over the coals.

Soon after the conclusion of the SCO drills, China welcomed the participation of the military forces of India and Pakistan and hoped that the two countries could enhance dialogue and cooperation, both bilaterally and within multilateral mechanisms, to maintain regional peace and stability. Hua Chunying, spokesperson at China’s foreign ministry, described the two countries as important South Asian players whose stable relationship is “significant to the peace and development of the region and the whole world”.

So far, the public reaction to the joint drills at the SCO has been positive in a sense that it has not received any public condemnation from the militant nationalists or extremist elements. Even the SCO closing event that ended with a joint dance to Bollywood tunes has been quite encouraging.

Sun Zhuangzhi, a Chinese social scientist, sees the Peace Mission 2018 drills as an exercise that will improve military and political mutual trust among SCO countries, especially between India and Pakistan. That is the only way forward.

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