

# The decrepit dialogue

## COMMENT

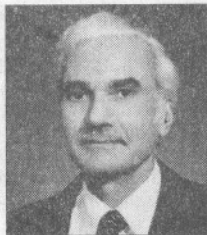
FOLLOWING THE KARGIL FIASCO and Agra failure, General Musharraf started seeking peace with India, striving to find an equitable solution to the Kashmir dispute. He thought this would open new vistas for economic cooperation between the two countries and generate a boom for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that has remained a hostage to the standoff between India and Pakistan.

India stood to benefit greatly from such a breakthrough as well. The Kashmir issue blighted its democratic credentials and it has had to billet more than half a million military personnel there. They have reportedly killed 100,000 people struggling against India's hostile presence in the region, maiming many times more and dishonouring a great number of local women. Its fraudulent accession of the state allows India *de facto* control of most of the territory. But the lack of legitimacy has not only cost India a lot of money and well-trained men but also tarnished its image abroad. A peaceful solution to this festering problem could also save India the recurring cost, and spawn exciting possibilities for the region.

Pakistan is also bound to benefit from normalising relations with India. For this can help Islamabad cut its military expenditure, steering crucial resources towards a social sector that currently would not be out of place in sub-Saharan Africa. Pakistan can also benefit from India's democratic experience. The fear that Bonapartism cannot be curbed is fuelled by mass illiteracy, poverty and the submissive attitude of the majority.

This apprehension has been reiterated in a recent Rand Corporation report by Christine Fair. Giving a conditional benefit of the doubt to India, she attaches high value to its fast-developing strategic cooperation with US which, she says, can make them "natural allies". US policy on Pakistan, she says, remains "Musharraf-focused", warning that this would deter the development of democracy. As a result, Pakistan could remain a "source of internal and regional insecurity".

If Pakistanis rise to the occasion and achieve the restoration of the 1973 Constitution a democratic order might emerge again. Rule of law can then help us attract a lot of foreign investment that has so far remained elusive despite the regime's efforts to woo the investor. Given the domestic political discontent, it is difficult to imagine many investors risking capital in a fuel transmission project through Pakistan.



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The dialogue with India, which started with great fanfare after the Islamabad Declaration, appears to have run aground for several reasons. In India, the BJP government was defeated in the polls. Its successor, the Congress government, won on a slim majority and acquired strange bedfellows such as the left-leaning Communist Party of India. While feeling obliged to continue with the democratic process in the country, the Congress has had to walk a tightrope due to domestic pressures.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is governed by a 'strongman' whose word is law. Accordingly, the two sides have vastly different approaches to the dialogue. While the Indian side wants quiet diplomacy and possibly some results, Pakistan wants publicity for the regime.

Also, India appears determined to hold long-drawn, inconclusive meetings on Kashmir, much like the Swaran Singh-Aziz Ahmed talks. It hopes to reap the benefits of economic cooperation as a result of the confidence building measures (CBMs) between the two countries. While the Indian government fears the electorate, the regime in Pakistan is not accountable to the people and has to contend with the legitimacy issue. A quick fix in Kashmir would boost its chances of survival due to the euphoria it can generate. India's diplomacy also smacks of a Big-Brother complex. This is evident from its opposition to arms sales to Pakistan.

No wonder the situation on the ground leaves much to be desired. India's foot-dragging on Baglihar Dam can result in unnecessary tensions between the two countries. Likewise, it has been pussyfoot-

ing the revival of the bus service between the two parts of Kashmir. Despite this prevarication and fridity, Indian Defence Minister Parnab Mukerjee is pushing for an EU-like 'common market'. Thus India is trying to have its cake and eat it too.

It is obvious that there is no military solution to the Kashmir dispute. Peace will elude the Subcontinent if India keeps it under its occupation. It is clearly a no-win situation. The people of India must realise that democracy can't sanction apartheid in Kashmir and Pakistan must realise that no 'strongman', however powerful at home, can dictate terms to a democratic India. They have to wipe out a huge democracy deficit which is undermining the country's credibility abroad despite its nuclear capability.

South Asia must reach for the peace dividends that remain grossly under-estimated.

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