Can India and Pakistan find friendship?

By Mustafa Qadri

With the Indian and Pakistani governments at loggerheads, informal relationships may be the subcontinent's key to peace

LIKE siblings locked in an endless rivalry, India and Pakistan have bickered for well over six decades. Transforming that rivalry into a mature, productive relationship will be difficult. But the consequences of continued animosity will be much worse. Two words punctuate the dangers of one of the world's longest running cold wars: nuclear weapons. For years both countries have militarised at a breathtaking pace based on a shared belief that the other may attack at any moment. Although the international community regularly calls for a scale-back of forces in the heavily fortified Indo-Pak border, many of the same nations, spearheaded by the United States and Russia, have been happy to sell billions of dollars' worth of deadly weaponry to India and Pakistan, escalating the risks and magnitude of any future conflict. Such hypocrisy is compounded by the fact that most citizens in the subcontinent remain desperately poor and deeply frustrated by generations of neglect and exploitation by elites to whom they are invisible except when it is politically expedient. Politicians opportunistically drum up jingoistic diatribes, complete with rent-a-crowd protesters, against our neighbours, who can be conveniently blamed for everything, but mostly terrorism. It doesn't help that India and Pakistan have gone to war on four occasions and have a history of supporting violent insurgencies in each other's territory. The sad irony is that we Desis remain bound at the cultural hip – be it our love for cricket, Bollywood and Pakistani tele-dramas, or class consciousness. Travel restrictions mean only a handful of us ever get to meet one another, creating a dangerous isolation that feeds racist stereotypes and turns dialogue into a political liability. Practicalities have meant that diplomatic back channels have remained open, even in the darkest of days that followed the murderous rampage through Mumbai in 2008 or the attack on the Indian parliament in 2001. But along with terrorism, regional pretensions have stymied conciliation. Both India and Pakistan have strived to be ever more incorporated into the American imperial project at the expense of the other. Both complain that the US favours the other at their expense. As you read this, a high-level Pakistani delegation is in Washington trying to convince the Obama administration to endorse a civilian nuclear energy programme akin to that it has already reached with India. For their part, Indian lobbyists

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already reached with India. For their part, Indian lobbyists argue that US reliance on Pakistan for its strategy in Afghanistan sidelines India's successful trade and development approach to stabilising that troubled country. If there are any silver linings amid the grey clouds of competition, it is the fact that normalising relations would be a boon for business in both countries. This is greatly hampered, however, by the lack of an effective business lobby in Pakistan – like everything else here, the economy is firmly dominated by generals. When Pakistan recently signed a gas pipeline deal with Iran, the world's second largest supplier, India was notable by its absence. India was originally part of the venture only to withdraw owing to its present frosty relationship with Pakistan. Much of that frost comes from the snowy peaks of Jammu and Kashmir, the Himalayan region India and Pakistan have fought three wars over. Resolving this dispute is pivotal to normalising relations, but observers on both sides of the border are unanimously pessimistic this will occur in the foreseeable future. It is "not clear who can sell" peace in Kashmir, says Dr Harsh Pant from Kings College. Only an Indian government led by the rightwing BJP, Pant argues, could accept the kind of overture from Pakistan that in 2007 nearly commenced concrete steps towards resolving the dispute because voters trust it more on national security issues. In opposition, however, the BJP has been happy to score political points against the current Congress-led government, claiming its overtures to Pakistan represent appeasement of the enemy. Civilian observers in Pakistan are sceptical their army would ever endorse any such move because the Kashmir issue is its raison d'être. Civilian leaders in both countries, and particularly India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, have pushed for continued talks between officials from their elected civilian governments. "Dialogue is the only way forward", says Indian analyst Kanti Bajpai, because "everything else India has tried", including the threat of war following the 2001 Indian parliament attack, has failed to change the dynamic. The perennial problem is the subservience of Pakistan's civilian government to military planners in Rawalpindi. Sadly, Pakistan's president Asif Zardari has proved incapable of breaking that imbalance. But, says Kamran Shafi from *Dawn newspaper*, it would help Pakistan's civilian leaders if India were to "draw down its (troop levels) in Kashmir" and maintain government to government dialogue as it has done. It may seem simplistic, but building relationships is the key to peace in the subcontinent in the foreseeable future. Even now our expatriates freely mingle abroad at universities and in professional circles. Our retired military men routinely swap war stories over bottles of aged scotch whiskey in international capitals. Despite the barriers, the informal relationships we forge are, in the words of one Indian correspondent recently returned from Pakistan, "the key to peace". To achieve peace, the subcontinent's largest siblings must grow out of old rivalries. COURTESY THE GUARDIAN