

payee's overture ✓

Mushahid Hussain

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Vajpayee remains Pakistan's best bet with which it can do business.

How should Pakistan respond to the Vajpayee overture, given that it has the potential of opening new possibilities slashing through the façade of rigidity that has been the hallmark of India's Pakistan policy since Agra?

Three key elements should shape Pakistan's response. First, the American role. The US policy presents an interesting dichotomy. Washington is seeking a change in the Middle East status quo. But in South Asia, the United States supports the status quo, albeit with cosmetic changes. Hence, it is pressuring both Pakistan and India. Pakistan is being told to curb 'cross-border infiltration', a formulation that approximates India's. Basically, Pakistan is being asked to revert to the Kashmir policy that was in place for 23 years after the Tashkent Declaration in 1966 till the beginning of the insurgency in 1989.

Second, India's compulsions. For its part, India is on notice that its membership in the 'select club' of global power brokers is contingent on defusing tensions on Kashmir. This means desisting from use of force with Pakistan and reaching out to the alienated Kashmiri populace with political initiatives. In other words, beginning talks with Pakistan and a concurrent dialogue within Occupied Kashmir. India is being made to realise that the unresolved Kashmir dispute and the nature of the conflicted relationship with Pakistan is the major impediment to its desire to play a larger-than-life international role.

Even more important than these factors is the insurgency in Kashmir, which has irrevocably alienated Kashmiri Muslims from India. There is pressure on India from within its own armed forces, and the security establishment to settle what is clearly the Indian version of a 'bleeding wound.'

Finally, Pakistan's interests. Islamabad should understand that the American role is limited to that of a 'fire brigade' - defusing crises and lowering tensions - not altering the status quo on Kashmir. Currently, US policy does not go beyond this narrow objective. Pakistan needs a more pro-active and imaginative approach, away from the tit-for-tat knee-jerk reactions that pass for policy.

When Armitage arrives in the region next week, Pakistan should present him with a doable 'wish list'. This could include:

* Initial steps for normality in relations with India including the appointment of High Commissioners in each other's capitals, and resumption of bus, travel and air services, all of which were unilaterally

suspended by India 16 months earlier;

* Resume the composite dialogue with India that would focus on Kashmir and the other 7 issues agreed upon between the two countries Foreign Secretaries in June 1997, and reaffirmed at Lahore;

* Revive the postponed SAARC Summit;

* Present Pakistan's perspective on Kashmir and relations with India for the forthcoming G-8 Summit, plus lobby with China, France and Germany;

* Establish a back channel for a serious and sustained dialogue with India.

Pakistan should also understand that any Anglo-American 'mediation' on Kashmir in the current global context would be more conducive to Indian interests. In 1962-1963, under Anglo-American prodding, Pakistan and India had an unproductive dialogue at the level of their respective Foreign Ministers - Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Swaran Singh. The Tashkent Declaration, under Moscow's mediation with American backing, was again a minus for Pakistan.

Conversely, Pakistan has got a better deal through direct negotiations with India. The Simla Accord in 1972 preserved Pakistan's position on Kashmir. The 1985 Zia-Rajiv agreement not to attack each other's nuclear installations recognised the nuclear parity established between the two states. And the Lahore Declaration too established the two neighbours relationship on the basis of sovereign equality, with none other than Vajpayee publicly accepting the legitimacy of the Muslim freedom struggle for the creation of Pakistan. The Lahore Declaration recognised the composite dialogue on Kashmir and the other 7 issues as the basis of any viable normalisation of relations between the two countries. That roadmap needs to be revived. In the present context too, this fundamental lesson of history must not be lost sight of.

In any negotiations with India on Kashmir, Pakistan needs to ensure that mistakes are not repeated, and some clear Do's and Don'ts are understood. For example:

* Don't expect to get at the conference table what has not been achieved on the ground, in other words, don't expect the Americans or anybody else to force India to hand over the Valley on a silver platter;

* Neither side would be negotiating from a position of strength or weakness: If India has a more conducive international environment on its side (especially after 9/11), that advantage is cancelled out by a more positive situation inside Occupied Kashmir from Pakistan's perspective since the people there reject Indian occupation;

* The focus, unlike Agra, should be on substance not semantics and no one session or summit should be seen as a make-or-break event;

* Kashmir should not be seen in a zero-sum-game situation as if the only options are either giving up on Kashmir or going to war, a firm principled policy can go hand-in-hand with postures of flexibility.

As Palestine has demonstrated, despite the ruthless demonstration of awesome Israeli military power, the popular will cannot be ignored or crushed and even Bush and Sharon have accepted the principle of a Palestine state by 2005. Similarly on Kashmir, Pakistan should remain steadfast, deploying deft and imaginative diplomacy, pursue a process that ends up altering the iniquitous status quo in Occupied Kashmir. That has to be Pakistan's bottom-line in any Kashmir settlement.

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Vajpayee's overture



After the end of the Iraq War, almost by a remarkable coincidence, Palestine and Kashmir are once again on the international radar screen, with a quiet prod from the Americans. A peaceful 'regime change' is being implemented in the Palestine Authority, with Yasser Arafat giving way to Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, while a not-so-subtle policy change is being sought on Kashmir from both Islamabad and New Delhi.



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The purpose is to soften their respective stands, lowering the political temperature so that a process gets going for resumption of normality and dialogue between the Sub-continental adversarial nuclear neighbours.

Secretary of State Colin Powell is being despatched to the Middle East, while his deputy, Richard Armitage, will land in South Asia next week. President Musharraf is going to visit Washington in June to meet President Bush, while, the same month, India's Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani will be in the American capital at the invitation of Vice President Cheney.

With their hands full in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Americans are apparently keen to avoid future flashpoints. Hence, the coordinated efforts to contain the crises in Palestine and Kashmir, or Korea for that matter.

Significantly, China is being encouraged by Washington to provide a helping hand. The talks with North Korea were held in Beijing. China is also helping to moderate the Indian stance with the most anti-China member of the Indian political elite, Defence Minister George Fernandes, waxing eloquent about 'friendship with China'. And for the first time, China has been invited to the summit of the G-8 select club, scheduled in France next month, in recognition of China's new emerging role as a charter member of the International Establishment.

It is in this new global environment that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has come out with his overture from Srinagar aimed at Pakistan and the alienated Kashmiris. Vajpayee's olive branch, although more in form rather than substance, is a step forward. He distanced himself from his hawkish colleagues in the BJP, managing to appease the Americans by coming across as 'reasonable' while trying to regain the initiative in the logjam that has frozen Pakistan-India relations since the Agra Summit in July 2001.

In several respects, Vajpayee's olive branch is in character with the man who has displayed a Nixonian vision for peace with Pakistan in the past. He came to Lahore on the bus journey in February 1999 capped by the symbolically significant visit to Minare-Pakistan. He sought a ceasefire with the Hizbul Mujahideen in the summer of 2000, even expressing his willingness to negotiate with the Kashmiri freedom fighters 'within the framework of humanity', a formulation he revived during his recent Srinagar visit. He even appointed a special representative to negotiate with the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), and in July 2001 warmly welcomed President Musharraf to India, in a surprising U-turn of attitudes and policy. And in the current context, notwithstanding the BJP's harsh rhetoric, Mr

Vajpayee remains Pakistan's best bet with which it can do business.

How should Pakistan respond to the Vajpayee overture, given that it has the potential of opening new possibilities slashing through the façade of rigidity that has been the hallmark of India's Pakistan policy since Agra?

Three key elements should shape Pakistan's response. First, the American role. The US policy presents an interesting dichotomy. Washington is seeking a change in the Middle East status quo. But in South Asia, the United States supports the status quo, albeit with cosmetic changes. Hence, it is pressuring both Pakistan and India. Pakistan is being told to curb 'cross-border infiltration', a formulation that approximates India's. Basically, Pakistan is being asked to revert to the Kashmir policy that was in place for 23 years after the Tashkent Declaration in 1966 till the beginning of the insurgency in 1989.

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Even more important than these factors is the insurgency in Kashmir, which has irrevocably alienated Kashmiri Muslims from India. There is pressure on India from within its own armed forces, and the security establishment to settle what is clearly the Indian version of a 'bleeding wound.'

Finally, Pakistan's interests. Islamabad should understand that the American role is limited to that of a 'fire brigade' - defusing crises and lowering tensions - not altering the status quo on Kashmir. Currently, US policy does not go beyond this narrow objective. Pakistan needs a more pro-active and imaginative approach, away from the tit-for-tat knee-jerk reactions that pass for policy.

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As Palestine has demonstrated, despite less demonstration of awesome Israeli power, the popular will cannot be ignored and even Bush and Sharon have accepted the principle of a Palestine state by 2005. Similarly, Pakistan should remain steadfast, confident and imaginative diplomacy, pursue that ends up altering the iniquitous status of Occupied Kashmir. That has to be Pakistan's line in any Kashmir settlement.

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