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Forward and backward steps

"It is possible to make a new beginning, but it depends on Pakistan. We will see what concrete steps Pakistan takes. I have extended the hand of friendship and want to see how Pakistan replies to it. Cross border terrorism should end. Talks can be opened on all subjects, including Jammu and Kashmir." —Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"I do not want to say anything more. It is a good beginning. Nobody has won and nobody has lost. Both have won. Frankly, I think, Mr. Vajpayee's gesture is genuine and I hope that it is genuine." —Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf.

Starting from Vajpayee's hand of friendship which he extended to Pakistan during his recent visit to Srinagar to his speech in the Indian parliament in which he conditioned the holding of Indo-Pak talks to the dismantling of so-called infrastructure of cross border terrorism, one can figure out a paradoxical situation in South Asia. Since September 11, 2001 till the first second week of April 2003, one can see a steady decline in Indo-Pak relations resulting into the rupture of not only official but also non-official ties. India took drastic steps to put pressure on Pakistan after the terrorist attack at the Indian parliament on December 13. It prohibited the use of Indian airspace by the Pakistani planes, cut off rail and road links, recalled its High Commissioner from Islamabad, downgraded diplomatic ties with Pakistan and deployed around half a million troops along its eastern borders. In May last year, the threat of an Indo-Pak war was narrowly averted because of substantial international pressure on the two countries to diffuse tension along their borders. President Musharraf's hand of friendship which he extended to Prime Minister Vajpayee on the occasion of 11th Saarc summit held in Kathmandu in January last year was not reciprocated by the other side. On the contrary, New Delhi launched a vehement campaign against Pakistan and alleging that the international community should take notice of the manner in which Islamabad was sponsoring cross border terrorism. Whereas, Islamabad held New Delhi responsible of following a highly inflexible approach on the normalisation process with its eastern neighbour. The intensity of Indo-Pak animosity reached its peak to an extent that there was no handshake between the Indian President and the Pakistani President when they attended the Almaty summit last year May.

What is the interest of New Delhi in extending its hand of friendship to Pakistan and what should be Islamabad's response in this regard? If Pakistan reciprocates positively to the Indian offer of talks, will such a step result into a meaningful launching of peace process between the two erstwhile neighbours? If seen in the perspective of the repeated Indian threat of pre-emptive strike against Pakistan and the hawkish stance of BJP leaders on the question of Kashmir, the



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Indian offer of friendship must be fairly debated and analysed. Four important factors must be taken into account for understanding the dynamics of Indo-Pak relations in the prevailing circumstances. First, if one follows events determining Indo-Pak relations closely, it will be clear that with the approaching of summer and the melting of snow in Kashmir, the tone of Indian leaders changes. Given the fact that the activities against the Indian military take a momentum with the melting of snow and support from the LoC increases, it has been New Delhi's policy to send feelers to Islamabad so as to

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prevent infiltration across the borders. From late April to July, the Indian military faces an uphill task in dealing with the incursion of armed Mujahideen, who according to New Delhi sneak into the Kashmir Valley from the Pakistan controlled Kashmir. Pakistan has suggested that the LoC can be monitored by international observers so that the Indian charges about cross border infiltration could be taken care off. It is yet to be seen to what extent the present offer is just an attempt by New Delhi to combat insurgency in its controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir or it is genuine in nature.

Second, it is very unfortunate that every conciliatory step either taken by India or by Pakistan is subverted by systematic means. If there are two steps forward, there are four steps backward. The Lahore declaration was overshadowed by the Kargil crisis resulting into severe tension between India and Pakistan. The Agra summit was followed by the events of September 11 and terrorist attacks on Kashmir Assembly in Srinagar on October 1 and the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. What is the surety that if there

is some progress from the offer of the Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee, some unpleasant event will not take place and undo the entire effort for normalisation in Indo-Pak relations? Third, a note of caution to the Pakistani ruling establishment. Last year June, India announced the withdrawal of the ban which it had imposed on its airspace for Pakistani planes. So far, Pakistan has not reciprocated to the Indian step and as a result Pakistan International Airlines is not operating its flights for Colombo, Dhaka and Kathmandu, the three capitals of SAARC countries. In order to improve climate for talks between India and Pakistan, it would be better if Islamabad positively reciprocates to the India withdrawal and lifts the ban which it had imposed on Indian planes for using its airspace. If such a step is taken, it will be possible to talk about the resumption of air links between Karachi and Delhi and Lahore and Delhi. Followed by that step, rail and road links between the two countries which have been suspended since January 1, 2002 could also be resumed. The purpose of suggesting all such steps is that without lifting restrictions on the movement of people from the two sides, one cannot expect any positive outcome of possible Indo-Pak talks.

Furthermore, the two sides (India and Pakistan) must stop exploiting Kashmir and religion to block the path of normalisation in their relations. Since 1947 till today, successive regimes of India and Pakistan have managed to evade real issues and divert the attention of people on matters which tend to remain complicated and unresolved. One will continue to see derailment of Indo-Pakistan normalisation process if the two sides remain bogged down on things which have cost at least two generations of South Asia basic necessities of life, security and peace. For Pakistan it must be clear that it cannot get Kashmir by force and India should keep the fact in mind that despite using all methods it has failed to win the hearts of Kashmiris. Based on these realities, there must be a logical and reasonable solution which can alleviate the plight of Kashmiris and start the process of negotiations for the just settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

Finally, before outside power players embark on their agenda in South Asia, India and Pakistan should act before it is too late. If the United States and its allies create a situation which exploits the Kashmir dispute for seeking a foothold in that region, the outcome will be disastrous for India and Pakistan. Therefore, both New Delhi and Islamabad should take immediate steps to launch the normalisation process. This would require resumption of travel, trade, commercial and other areas of cooperation, steps for implementing military confidence-building measures, stopping hostile propaganda and at the same time starting talks on the settlement of pending disputes including Kashmir, Siachen and terrorism. A new beginning in South Asia is only possible when both India and Pakistan seriously take steps to diffuse tension and prevent the outbreak of hostilities.