

Moving with confidence

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Pakistan's initiative of a unilateral ceasefire is not only timely but reflects Pakistan's consistent call for dialogue and negotiations with India to resolve all bilateral issues including Kashmir. The Indian response also reflects the Indian posturing — trying to score diplomatic points while resisting substantive moves to dialogue on Kashmir. Thus, they have welcomed Pakistan's initiative — they could hardly have done otherwise since it is a unilateral gesture on Pakistan's part — but once again added the infiltration refrain. This refrain is now becoming absurd.

Nevertheless, Pakistan has, in yet another magnanimous gesture, welcomed even the half-hearted Indian response. However, Pakistan cannot make unilateral gestures ad infinitum and the ball is very definitely in India's court now. Of course, the international community's posturing on South Asia and Kashmir does not encourage movements towards dialogue and peace. The US supply and approval of sales of destabilising weapon systems to India is a major deterrent to peace in South Asia. In addition, the British government has been adopting a strangely aggressive posture towards Pakistan. Beginning with its efforts to bug our High Commission in London and the subsequent stone-walling of queries from the Pakistan government, Mr Blair has had the audacity to refer to Kashmir in the context of terrorism and the British High Commissioner in Islamabad has made intrusive statements on our domestic political issues. And, in the UN, while our resolution on self-determination did pass through the General Assembly, it did not get through on consensus. India called for a vote and the abstentions and absences especially should be an eye-opener for Pakistan, especially in terms of states it regards as friends and allies!

Of the important Muslim states, Indonesia abstained — unlike other Muslim states like Malaysia which gave a positive vote as did Turkey, Syria, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to name just a few. Another surprise was Sri Lanka, a country that has always been supported substantively by Pakistan. Of course, the US, UK and France abstained as did the Russian Federation while Afghanistan chose to remain absent. Given the continuing hostile tirades coming from Kabul and the Karzai government's close links to India, this stance should not come as a surprise. Of course, had they voted with India (only two other states did — Mauritius and Bhutan), it could have led to negative unintended consequences for them from their neighbour Pakistan! Strange, too, why South Africa abstained given that we had always supported the South Africans right to self-determination when apartheid ruled in that country. Iraq also absented itself — but then this is a US-occupied Iraq! Incidentally, North Korea also abstained — showing the links the state has with India!

More to the point, Pakistan does tend to absorb hostile behaviour from states rather too well — especially when it comes from the US and Europe. We still have not taken any strong action — even symbolic — against Britain despite the increasingly hostile actions coming from the Blair government. With the US, of course, there is a constant accommodation on our part. Incidentally, in the context of Pakistan-India relations, for those who keep reminding some of us that we should learn from the case of China which has set aside its Taiwan issue with the US in order to undertake necessary economic cooperation, I think they are not aware of the ground realities even in the case of China. Having just returned from Beijing after attending a symposium on US-European-China relations, the whole focus of the Sino-US relations was Taiwan. For the Chinese this was the definitive issue with the US and there was hardly any discussion on economic cooperation and so on. And, on Taiwan, the Chinese position was clear-cut and there was no accommodation of segments of the US government and Congressional flirtations with Taiwanese leaders and the move by the new Taiwanese leadership to hold a referendum. So, while economics may be important, China is certainly not about to compromise on the core issue of Taiwan. Therefore, there is much we can learn from China and much that we should — given the leaps forward China is taking — but the first lesson is that there can be no compromise on core national issues.



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So, while gestures like the unilateral ceasefire are welcome steps, Pakistan has to expose Indian intransigence on Kashmir in particular but also on dialogue in general. One of the major problems for Pakistan is the seeming confusion within the Indian government. Mr Vajpayee has once again rejected UN resolutions on Kashmir (this time in Syria, on 16 November) and declared that it is the bilateral Simla Agreement and Lahore Declaration which are now the acceptable frameworks for the resolution of the Kashmir issue.

Obviously Mr Vajpayee is suffering from amnesia on this count. To begin with, UN resolutions only become invalid if they are superseded by additional UN resolutions with the assent of all the parties involved. However, leaving aside this major legal issue, Mr Vajpayee surely must be aware that India has destroyed the Simla Agreement on the ground. Article 2:ii of the Agreement states: "Pending the final settlement of any of the problems between the two countries, neither side shall unilaterally alter the situation ..."

Once India occupied Siachin in 1984, the status quo was altered and therefore the Agreement destroyed. This point of maintaining the status quo was then re-stressed specifically with relation to Kashmir and the LoC, in Article 6:ii of the Agreement. India then made other incursions across the LoC also in Chor Bat La and Qamar sector and continues to hold on to these occupations illegally. So where is the Simla Agreement that Mr Vajpayee swears by? In shambles on the ground!

As for the Lahore Declaration, it calls for the commitment of both countries to "the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations, and the universally accepted principles of peaceful coexistence" and it reiterates "the determination of both countries to implementing the Simla Agreement in letter and spirit". So first Mr Vajpayee's government needs to restore the Simla Agreement on the ground, before the Lahore Declaration becomes implementable! Again, the Lahore Declaration commits both countries to "intensify their composite and integrated dialogue process for an early and positive outcome of the agreed bilateral agenda". So, perhaps, Mr Vajpayee should re-read this Declaration and move towards dialogue on all issues including Kashmir as agreed to in the framework decided for the composite dialogue by both states.

As for Pakistan, it really cannot do much more unilaterally on the Kashmir and India fronts. It needs to harness its economic progress and move to widening the scope of its foreign relations' interests beyond South Asia. There is also a need to project our critical role in the war on terrorism and its success so far. After all, without Pakistan's support the US would not have managed any progress in its war against al-Qaeda. But for Pakistan the dividends have not been there. Pakistanis continue to languish, with no legal support, in Guantanamo Bay and in Kabul prisons. Those few who are set free should claim damages especially from the US government which chained them, abused their basic human dignity and kept them in inhuman confinement with no case against them for years.

So the first priority for Pakistan in its relations with its presumed allies should be to assert the dignity of the Pakistani citizen in these lands. There is no need for an apologetic approach. Yes, we have an extremist problem but so do other states — especially the non-Muslim ones where extremists — from the religious variety to the political fascists — are either in power or form a strong opposition. And the US itself is hostage to Christian fundamentalism presently. So the extremist issue should not be a pretext for abusing Pakistanis in general. And it is up to the state to ensure that its citizens are treated with dignity — for in that lies the dignity of the state as well. That is why, presently, Pakistan is becoming a favourite whipping boy of all and sundry as issues arise. This has to stop and we are in a position to ensure that it does. All we need is the confidence in our own abilities and patience to sustain our core interests even as we move proactively to further peace and security.

The views expressed by the writer are her own