

Perceptions and realpolitik

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PAKISTANI perception that the Indian claim to secularism is bogus, and the Indian impression that Pakistan is on the way to becoming a theocracy, would both bear qualification. In theory and in law the Indian polity is secular. In actual practice the situation varies as between regions and levels of government. Society is more secular-minded in the southern states than it is in the northern Hindi-speaking belt. In its policies and practices the central government is more secular than are the state and local governments.

In a recent article in this newspaper (December 13), Mr Kuldeep Nayar tells us that "safronization" is spreading in India, the communal "genie" is out of the bottle, the notion of "Hindutva" is seizing the minds of an increasing number of people, and that the BJP is no longer disguising its links with militant Hindu organizations. Let us suppose for a moment that India becomes, unabashedly, a Hindu state. What would be the consequences for its relations with Pakistan?

It is hard to say. For one thing, we have no historical experience on which to base speculation: there are no examples during the last one thousand years or so of a Hindu state's transactions with its non-Hindu neighbours. Two indicators, one of them rather feeble, come to mind. First, India's relations with Pakistan have been no worse when Hindu parties controlled the Indian government than when Congress leaders (Nehru, Shastri, Indira Gandhi) ruled. Second, India's relations with most of the Muslim countries (other than Pakistan) have throughout been reasonably friendly and cooperative. Let us then not be overly apprehensive about the spreading "safronization."

In theory, and according to its constitution, Pakistan is an Islamic, not a secular, state. Actually, this is not the case. Its people have repudiated the more serious proponents of Islamization (Islamic political parties) in every election. These parties did better in 2002 mainly because Gen Musharraf would not let the "mainstream" parties (PPP and PML-N) contest the election unhindered. Even Ziaul Haq's commitment to Islam was more apparent than real; he too used it as an instrument in the service of his unbounded political ambition. Indian observers are doubtless aware of all this; their assertion that Pakistan is a theocracy can then only be regarded as hostile propaganda.

Pakistani policy makers and commentators have always believed that India is a hegemonic and expansionist power. I think it is safe to say that India does not intend to invade and absorb any of the currently independent countries in its neighbourhood. It may, however, covet influence, verging upon control, beyond its borders, which is about the same as hegemony.

That India wishes to be the dominant power in South Asia, and beyond, does not

the verge of falling apart. North Vietnam did not accept the overlordship of either China or the Soviet Union, even though it needed their assistance in fighting the United States, mainly because it was internally a coherent and united whole. The best way for Pakistan to preserve its freedom of choice in its domestic and foreign policies is not to call upon India to stop being hegemonic but to put its own house in order and develop the inner strength to ward off external pressure.

Moving on to one of our self-perceptions, it has become customary on our part to think and speak of our country as India's rival. Spain was a rival of England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when they were powers of roughly equal rank. But that ceased to be the case when Spain became poorer and weaker. Closer to our own time, Iraq was once a rival of Egypt, but Jordan is content with minding its own business. Students of international politics know that a relatively small state will likely

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ruin itself if it assumes a posture of rivalry with one whose capabilities are clearly much larger. It should be understood also that being somebody's enemy is not the same as being his rival.

Pakistan cannot be India's equal or rival. Its nuclear capability, like that of India, is at best a power to deter, not a power to compel. It follows that we should quit referring to Pakistan as India's nuclear rival. Needless to say, if we wish to maintain the current momentum for peace and amity, we should also stop referring to India as "the enemy."

There is no good reason for us to resent India's efforts to build receptivity to its interests in Central Asia and elsewhere in the Muslim world. India's exclusion from those places—assuming that it could be arranged—would not automatically instal Pakistan in positions of advantage. Note also that there are other powers active in the area and better situated to check and balance India's designs.

Let us now turn briefly to the "core" issue in Indo-Pakistan relations, the one relating to Kashmir, and messed up in semantic ambiguities. Pakistan has been asking India to recognize its "centrality" to the good order of their relations. Pakistan wants it to be treated as a "dispute" whereas India wants to treat it as nothing more than an issue that might be taken up some day. Pakistan wants negotiations: India may, at best, agree to "talks." This battle of words can be traced to Pakistan's legalistic inclination to base its position on the relevant United Nations resolutions of more than half a century ago, the efficacy of which

somewhere along the line. It does not really matter whether the exercise is called negotiation, talk, discussion, or conversation. Nor does it matter whether the subject is called a dispute, issue, problem, question, or merely an "agenda item."

Pakistani spokesmen have a very difficult act to perform. Beyond a genuinely sympathetic concern for the aspirations of the Kashmiri people, they have two very different audiences to address. They feel they must not give the domestic "hawks" ground for alleging that Gen Musharraf has knuckled down to India under external pressure and sold vital national interests down the river. To appease these domestic foes they say that the government's stand on Kashmir remains unchanged.

At the same time, they have to consider the logic of ground realities and listen to voices of prudence both at home and abroad. Responding to these voices and considerations, General Musharraf has devised an approach to the Kashmir issue that should be eminently satisfactory from the Indian viewpoint. He proposes four steps or stages for tackling it: (1) the two sides should begin discussing the matter; (2) accept its "centrality"; (3) identify and discard solutions that are unacceptable to any of the three concerned parties (Pakistan, India, and the Kashmiris); (4) look for a solution that is acceptable to all of them.

India loses nothing by beginning discussions. That step alone will not commit either side to any particular direction. Nor does it hurt India to concede the problem's "centrality." That concession can have adverse consequences only if it means that the resolution of other issues between the two countries must await a Kashmir settlement. But Gen Musharraf has clearly stepped back from that position.

Quite a few of the peace moves proposed during the past few weeks have been accepted by the two governments without any prior negotiations. Others have been adopted following talks that lasted only a couple of days. This has been happening even though no talks concerning Kashmir are even scheduled. It follows that the Indian acceptance of "centrality" may not have any consequence other than that of giving Gen Musharraf a talking point vis-à-vis his opponents. So, why be niggardly with gestures that cost nothing, why not give him a little something to take home?

Reject solutions that are unacceptable to any of the three parties, and find one that all of them will accept, says the general. The option of holding a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people, in accordance with the UN resolutions, may be the first to be knocked off the negotiating table almost. The search for a solution that will invite unanimous approval could extend over a very long stretch of time.

Students of diplomacy know that, depending on the nature of the issue and the attendant circumstances, negotiations can go on for years before a settlement is reached. Such, for instance, was the case with SALT ONE and TWO (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) between the United States and the Soviet Union. The present government in Pakistan may be as interested in taking cred-

the communal "game" is out of the notion of "Hindutva" is seizing the minds of an increasing number of people, and that the BJP is no longer disguising its links with militant Hindu organizations. Let us suppose for a moment that India becomes, unabashedly, a Hindu state. What would be the consequences for its relations with Pakistan?

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That India wishes to be the dominant power in South Asia, and beyond, does not mean that it will actually achieve such a status. In this day and age hegemony cannot be imposed on others merely by a show of physical force. It costs a lot of money. America's hegemony, such as it is, costs it tens of billions of dollars every year. India simply does not have that kind of money.

It may be assumed that the nations that are sought to be dominated will yield only if they are weak, internally divided, and on

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This battle of words is wholly dysfunctional, it will go nowhere, and it should be abandoned—the sooner the better. India does recognize that the situation in Kashmir poses an exceedingly troublesome problem. It would like to exclude Pakistan from the list of those concerned, but I think it knows that this cannot be done. It may then be willing to discuss the subject with Pakistan

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Students of diplomacy know that, depending on the nature of the issue and the attendant circumstances, negotiations can go on for years before a settlement is reached. Such, for instance, was the case with SALT ONE and TWO (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) between the United States and the Soviet Union. The present government in Pakistan may be as interested in taking credit at home for having got the talks on Kashmir started as it may be in their outcome. There is then really no good reason for India to be wary of these talks, or to insist that they will not begin until "cross border" infiltrations have stopped completely.

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