## Not a false dawn

too much good news has not been good for South Asian politics. A series of far-sighted and confidence-building steps taken by Pakistan and India, during the past few weeks, topped by a bold state-President Pervez Musharraf on December 18, had raised hopes that the two sides were now determined to initiate a comprehensive process leading to durable peace and amity in the subcontinent.

But those hopes have now been dampened. India's low-key reaction to Musharraf's Kashmir offer was disappointing, if not cynical. Are we to believe that the sharp-eyed experts at India's external affairs ministry failed to grasp the full significance of the

Pakistani president's statement? If that is not the case, then why a lukewarm reaction to a crucial policy statement?

For the first time since the Kashmir dispute began, the top man in Pakistan has publicly stated that his country is prepared to leave aside Security Council Resolutions on Kashmir in an attempt to resolve the perennial dispute.

\* This observation was made about two weeks before the Saarc summit to be attended, among others, by the Indian prime minister.

\* The Pakistani leader has warned that if we throw away "the very real opportunity" to make peace, it is the moder-

ates who will lose and the extremists will win on either side — an ominous development for both Pakistan and India.

It is difficult to assess at this stage the real reason behind foreign minister Yashwant Sinha's low key reaction conveyed after a meeting of the Indian cabinet. Was it simply a diplomatic stratagem designed to conceal New Delhi's gratification at the new development or was it a continuation of India's cynical attitude adopted after the Agra summit? Or did it reflect a genuine suspicion of

1's intentions and motives? be New Delhi is still undecided as to le New Denn is still discover the welcome change in Islamabad's Wamir policy and attitude toward India heen brought about solely by American essure or dictated by a genuine desire to acefully settle bilateral disputes.

Prime Minister Jamali's statement that the UN resolutions cannot be overlooked could not have been more ill-timed and illadvised because it will only help to strengthen Indian suspicions and misgivings. New Delhi must be wondering which of the two statements truly reflects the thinking in

AS past experience has taught us. Islamabad — President Musharraf's interview to the Reuter's or his prime minister's observations to NDTV. The hallmark of a true leader is not to be led by populist notions but to lead his people along rational and pragmatic lines. President Musharraf's Kashmir statement is a bold and timely offer to give dejure recognition to a de facto situation in the Security Council provided India is prepared to respond positively.

The problem with New Delhi seems to be, as is apparent from its response to Musharraf's Kashmir offer, that it is still in two minds about taking the Pakistani president at his word. Kargil appears to be still haunting New Delhi. But if Pakistan is prepared to forget the past and look to the future, why can't India let bygones be bygones? The only sensible approach for the two sides is to start a comprehensive dialogue, accept the importance of Kashmir dispute (let us not use the word 'centrality' as New Delhi is allergic to it) and look for a solution acceptable to all the concerned par-

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> ties. The only way for Mr. Vajpayee to find out whether President Musharraf means what he says is to have a face to face meeting with him during the forthcoming Saarc summit. There is no other way to test the sincerity of Pakistan on this and other related issues.

> According to a recent Indian Express report, "there has not been a single infiltration attempt across the Line of Control since the ceasefire came into effect." The assessment is based on inputs from Indian intelligence bureau, military intelligence and the border security force. The stoppage of infiltration across the LoC is a development of major significance which should facilitate the beginning of a comprehensive peace process between the two neighbours. After the failure of Agra summit, Mr. Vajpavee on July 23, 2001 said that the Agra talks broke down because of "Pakistan's adamant attitude against making any reference to crossborder terrorism." According to the Indian version, the Agra summit failed because Mr. Vajpayee failed to get a commitment from President Musharraf on ending cross-border

infiltration (which India calls "terrorism").

Now when this infiltration has come to an end and there has been a strategic change in Pakistan's Kashmir policy, Mr. Vajpayee should fulfil his part of the commitment contained in his well-known "musings" in 2001 and 2002 that he was ready to "get off the beaten track" to find a solution to the Kashmir dispute. By insisting, in his recent address to BJP parliamentarians, that for talks to be meaningful, mujahideen camps in Azad Kashmir should be destroyed, Mr. Vaipavee is going far beyond Agra. No one knows it better than the Indian prime minister, himself a seasoned politician, that the man across the border also needs his domestic constituency to back him up and even a military ruler has his limitations and cannot give anything away unilaterally.

Ceasefire and CBMs are only a means to an end. They cannot sustain themselves for long in the absence of meaningful followups. The hard-liners in Pakistan have always argued against choking of support for the

> Kashmiri militants because, in their opinion, that would leave Pakistan with no Kashmir policy as it will deprive Islamabad of the only means available to keep the Kashmir dispute alive.

The danger is that if New Delhi does not respond positively to Musharraf's peace offer it will give the impression that, having forced Islamabad to give up support for cross-border infiltration, it is no longer enthusiastic about solving the Kashmir dispute amicably. If India does not act to dispel these fears, it will only weaken the moderates and strengthen the hands of extremists and hard-liners in

Pakistan.

It is, therefore, in the interest of both India and Pakistan to move out of their past mindsets, initiate a meaningful and comprehensive dialogue and settle their disputes by being " bold and flexible", as President Musharraf has put it.

It is, however, apparent that any earnest search for reconciliation and adjustment is pivoted on mutual trust, a scarce commodity in the sub-continent. The real problem is that both the neighbours are caught in a selfcreated trap of pathological distrust of each other extending over more than half a century. Mutual suspicions have reached a stage where a face-to-face meeting between the Indian prime minister and the Pakistan President could perhaps change the entire atmospherics.

Interestingly, President Musharraf's peace initiative may have far-reaching implications for BJP's internal and India's domestic politics. If Islamabad's peace initiative gathers momentum, Vajpayee may lead the BJP in the 2004 parliamentary elections and may win them on a more moderate plank.