

Towards enduring peace

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Few regions in the world can compete with South Asia in springing surprises. Important developments can take place in this part of the world when they are least expected. When guns fell silent on the LoC and the Siachen Glacier, at midnight on November 25 - after almost 25 years - even the most inveterate optimists were taken by surprise.

A look at some of the headlines appearing in newspapers since then will show how meaningful has been the change in the thinking and attitude of the rulers in Islamabad and New Delhi:

- * Pakistan willing to reopen Khokrapar route, start Srinagar bus service and ferry service between Karachi and Mumbai.

- * New Delhi's response encouraging - Jamali

- * More positive steps expected.

- * Pakistan has changed its mindset-Yashwant Sinha

- * Ceasefire can prove harbinger of peace - India

- * Musharraf offers resumption of overflights.

- * Train service restoration: Pakistan team to visit India on December 17.

- * Delhi wants hotline between coastguards to prevent frequent arrest of fishermen from both countries.

- * Move positive - Pakistan foreign office.

- * PIA to operate 12 flights to India - an expanded operation

- * Peace with Pakistan, key to progress - Vajpayee

What is baffling is that only a few weeks ago, Vajpayee's 12-point initiative had not received quite a positive response from Pakistan. Yet his proposals have now been accepted by Islamabad - almost totally. What has caused this amazing change of heart?

The change has resulted from a variety of factors. It is too early to reckon which of them has played a decisive role in convincing Islamabad and New Delhi that their own self-interest demands that they settle their differences as expedi-

no denying that the US has become an arbiter of sorts between Pakistan and India.

There has been an obvious increase in US interest in South Asia. For the first time since the end of the Second World War America has its forces stationed in South Asia. In the ongoing war against terrorism, this part of the world has acquired a key position in US strategy.

Which of these compulsions and pressures have played a major role in convincing the two countries to change their thinking and adopt a more flexible, pragmatic and trustful approach? The answer to this question will ultimately determine the future of India-Pakistan relations. The painful realisation that continuous confrontation for over fifty years has already taken a heavy toll will lay the foundation of enduring peace and amity.

The importance of American pressure in the politics of South Asia cannot be denied. It is also apparent that the events of the past few weeks could not perhaps have taken place without promptings and inducements from Washington. One, however, hopes that the American pressure was not the only factor in bringing about a change in the policy and attitude on either side.

Enduring results cannot be achieved under duress. Unless both sides realise that their own interests demand a sincere effort on their part to heal the past wounds, the peace process cannot succeed in South Asia.

The cease-fire would not have taken place at a better time. Infiltration into Kashmir always declines during the winter as mountain passes are closed by snow. And let us hope that as the snow melts on the mountains, the inexorable march of events will have brought about a genuine thaw in bilateral relations.

India has got to get rid of its obsession of General Pervez Musharraf that has lingered on since Agra. Since the failure of Agra summit, the Vajpayee government has made it a point

tiously as possible.

It will, however, be worthwhile to enumerate the long-ignored realities which are likely to have persuaded Pakistan and India to start the latest peace process:

- * Pakistan can neither fight terrorism nor modernise itself without ending permanent confrontation with India.

- * The realisation in Islamabad as well as in New Delhi that the Kashmir dispute has forced more than one billion people of the subcontinent to suffer immeasurably for more than half a century.* Infiltration in Kashmir and the killing of innocent people have only managed to de-legitimise a genuine Kashmir movement that had considerably undermined India's moral legitimacy.

- * Core issues, however, unpleasant have to be addressed. The process of peace making in South Asia cannot move forward without making progress on Kashmir.

- * As long as India remains pinned down in Kashmir, it cannot play its due role in world affairs.

- * The world has enormously changed after 9/11 and Iraq war. Islamabad has no choice but to adapt its policies to the new security environment.

- * Pakistan is faced with strategic imbalance. With our meager resources and comparative isolation, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to maintain a credible minimum deterrence.

- * Pakistan will not remain a "valuable ally" for the United States for all times to come. Pakistan-US relations, as aptly described by Stephen Cohen, are something of a "temporary liaison." On the other hand, India-US relations are based on more durable and long-term strategic interests.

- * And lastly, the most important factor: While Pakistan has always been receptive to American mediation over Kashmir, India had so far been hesitant to accept it. It now appears New Delhi feels confident that it has convinced influential quarters in Washington that the Kashmir issue is intimately connected with the global war against terrorism.

The Vajpayee government, therefore, does not now seem to be averse to accepting the United States as a "facilitator". Whatever name we may give to Washington's role, there is

to side-track General Musharraf and appeal directly to the people of Pakistan. Without including him in any serious Pakistan-India dialogue, New Delhi will be committing the same mistake as Nawaz Sharif did by not taking the armed forces into confidence before launching the Lahore peace initiative.

Islamabad, for its part, must realise that Vajpayee is the best bet for any enduring Pakistan-India settlement. Pakistan should not fritter away the opportunity that has come its way. By a fortunate coincidence, the present leaderships in Pakistan and India are uniquely positioned to resolve their bilateral disputes peacefully.

We are lucky that two major positive developments have occurred in both countries. The BJP has won the recent crucial state elections without using the communal card. Its victory in the state elections shows that the people of India have endorsed Vajpayee's peace initiative and hate-Pakistan campaign is no longer a vote-getter in India.

Pakistan, too, has not lagged behind in sending a positive signal to India. For the first time in 50 years, the role of the opposition vis-a-vis relations with India has been positive and constructive. Perhaps the main reason for this is that the opposition in Pakistan today is more suspicious of the US than India and is therefore not opposing the move for normalisation of relations between the two countries.

The relations between India and Pakistan are best described by a remark of the Roman historian Polybius: "We can neither endure our condition, nor the measures to overcome them."

There is no easy way out of the complexities of Pakistan-India relations. In view of the pulls and pressures at work on either side, it will be naive to expect a quick-fix solution to the problem. However, at the same time, it is necessary to implement, in all sincerity, the various confidence-building measures the two sides have agreed upon. This will pave the way for tackling more challenging and complex issues facing the two countries. Can Musharraf and Vajpayee get out of the Kashmir minefield and lay the foundation of enduring peace and amity between the two nations?