

e a peace summit as well?

OP-ED



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Concrete steps towards resolving the Siachin issue and putting an end to the mindless war on the freezing heights where more soldiers succumb to the bitter cold than enemy fire are something that can be discussed on the sidelines of the summit

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there have been other confidence building measures as well. For instance, a more stringent ban was imposed by the government on militant groups such as Jaish that are cited by India as being active in Kashmir. The government of Azad Kashmir also proscribed six of these militant groups.

Similarly, after registering its protest Pakistan has not, so far, made a major issue of the fence India continues to build on its side of the LoC. But, there have been a number of positive reciprocal moves that are generating a significant momentum for peace, building on the groundswell of which the people to people dialogue is one important manifestation. For example, the resumption of the bus and air link between the two countries with the rail link hopefully not far behind is an important development. But, it is also important to resume the dialogue between the two countries at the highest level.

So far, this aspect of the proceedings remains the subject of a degree of confusion. It seems that Prime Minister Vajpayee will meet with Prime Minister Jamali as part of the 'bilaterals' among the SAARC leaders. The Indian prime minister appeared to underline his preference for meeting the Pakistani premier in late November when he told newspapermen in Lucknow that 'I shall be happy if Jamali meets me.'

For reasons that have to do with the configuration of power, even if protocol were to be set aside, Vajpayee should not pass up the opportunity to meet with Musharraf, as well. Pakistan's commitment that it will not raise the Kashmir issue during the formal SAARC deliberations is a positive one and India should reciprocate in the same spirit by discussing it meaningfully in a bilateral context.

In any case, a meeting at this level is important not because it will lead to an immediate resolution of complex outstanding issues, least of all Kashmir, but because it will unmistakably signal intent. In fact, summit meetings between the two sides should become a matter of routine. It is precisely because such a meeting becomes a major event and the subject of interminable discussion and speculation that unrealistic expectations become attached to the exercise.

Summits are important not for a quick resolution of the problems but because they serve to maintain a momentum within the process that is bound to get bogged down if left to instinctively cautious bureaucracies. While complex issues cannot be resolved overnight, unending hair-splitting and gradualism is also a luxury that we can no longer afford. The attack on the Indian parliament at the end of 2001 and the two assassination attempts on President Musharraf at the end of 2003

should serve to remind us of what we are up against and how quickly the situation can change for the worse.

Something that can be usefully discussed on the sidelines is putting high on the agenda concrete steps towards resolving the Siachin issue and putting an end to the mindless war on the freezing heights where more soldiers succumb to the bitter cold than enemy fire. India has proposed that the ceasefire along the LoC be extended to the Actual Ground Position Line in Siachin. Pakistan can refer to the agreement that was virtually in place in 1989 based on redeployment of forces to positions occupied by both sides at the time of the Simla Agreement. A final agreement on this issue will save precious lives as well as huge material resources that both sides expend on a particularly insane war and provide a much-needed push to the desperate, though formidable, quest for peace in South Asia.

Meanwhile, it is certainly encouraging that the SAARC foreign ministers approved Thursday the framework treaty for free trade in the region by 2006 as well as adopting an additional protocol on terrorism to stop funding for terrorist outfits.

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IT IS APTLY ILLUSTRATIVE THAT AS the 12th SAARC summit opens in Islamabad, attention at home and abroad is focused not so much on the SAARC agenda as on what may happen on the sidelines between India and Pakistan. There is a general sense that both sides are willing to take concrete steps in that direction. But the optimism is tinged with the knowledge that many a false dawn has preceded this moment and major constraints, on either side, remain in place.

The two assassination attempts on the life of President Pervez Musharraf within weeks prior to the SAARC summit were indicative of the single-minded determination to say nothing of the resourcefulness of the militant lobby opposed, among other things, to any rapprochement with India. On the other side, as the BJP goes into an election year, it remains reluctant to resume a composite dialogue with Pakistan in order to reap the perceived electoral advantages of a hard line.

Its insistence that 'cross-border terrorism' has not ceased completely makes little sense after Pakistan's unilateral ceasefire on the Line of control (LoC), duly reciprocated by India. For years India has argued that Pakistan's shelling across the LoC is primarily meant to provide cover to the militants crossing over. Now the argument is that in winter the snow closes the passes