

Building upon momentum

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The beginning of the year 2004 presents a different picture in the Subcontinent as against the tension-packed period that scared the world with the ripe possibility of outbreak of nuclear hostilities between India and Pakistan. The eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, which was a marked feature of their mutual relations since December 13, 2001 took a heavy toll on the economies of both countries speeding up the backdoor diplomacy to help efforts defuse the crisis.

At the end of the long day, good sense prevailed and South Asia was spared a catastrophe of gigantic proportions. The continuation of hostilities also delayed the holding of SAARC conference for one year. Against this background of tension and nuclear brinkmanship, the mood in New Delhi and Islamabad is very upbeat now with both countries all set to resume stalled dialogue from the next month onwards after the restoration of full diplomatic ties.

The recently concluded SAARC summit has been instrumental in bringing about meetings between Pakistani and Indian leaderships at the highest level. The issuance of a joint statement after a meeting between President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee also sends positive signals promising to initiate stalled process of dialogue. However the fact remains that full two years have been wasted in useless belligerence and deadlock.

Had Agra served as a seminal point for a structured dialogue, much headway could have been made by now. Even earlier the Lahore Declaration would have laid the foundation of a phased dialogue, had the occasion not been allowed to be held hostage to the vested interests in both countries. After strained relationship marked by nuclear brinkmanship, it should become clear by now that adversarial approaches can be no substitute for a pragmatic understanding for the solution of the

mature approach of rising above personal rivalries with the clear distinction between personal interest and the national interest. Nawaz Sharif's PML is also in the favour of dialogue with India for the solution of all outstanding issues including Kashmir.

Nawaz Sharif showed great vision by starting a dialogue process with India before being ousted. Thus this rare political unity should be used as a window of opportunity to craft consensus on Pakistan's position in the forthcoming dialogue and if the question of going beyond stated positions comes up with India also doing the same, this unity can be a plus for formulating national response. The government's reaching out to the ARD parties on a dialogue with India would make Pakistan's position quite strengthened now.

At Lahore peace process in 1999, there were differences on how to proceed with India between Civilian leadership and military top brass as is clear from subsequent developments culminating in the signing of Washington Declaration on July 4, the initiation of Kargil adventure by the Pakistan army and finally the ouster of the PM Nawaz Sharif from power.

It is a fact that differences between both these powerful sections have persisted in Pakistan's political history and whenever any civilian government tried to go beyond the line drawn by military, things could not be kept intact and resulted in the political upheavals. There is now a welcome convergence between Pakistan's military position and that of the civilian leadership on how to approach the solution of Kashmir issue. If there remains this joint partnership, there is a hope that things could move on in the right direction and these peace overtures between India and Pakistan could yield concrete results.

On the Indian side, there is a growing realisation that no coercive approach to browbeat Paki-

Kashmir dispute.

As both countries embark upon the process of rapprochement duly supported by the initiation of composite dialogue, there are encouraging signs that things could be different this time round provided the leadership of both countries learn lessons from the beleaguered past. Some points are instructive in this regard:

Firstly there are no anti-dialogue elements on the national political scene in Pakistan. The religious forces that are known for their vehement opposition to the government of the day on Kashmir and reconciliation process with India are on board courtesy their deal on LFO with the government. During PM Vajpayee's Lahore initiative the Jamaat-i-Islami brought out protest demonstrations dubbing the subsequent Lahore Declaration as a sell-out on Kashmir. It did not resort to any protest on this tour of the Indian PM and was all for settlement of all disputes through negotiations.

The religious forces may express a bit of disagreement on the government's approach to the solution of Kashmir issue but they are by no means against this thawing of relationship between India and Pakistan. This is a marked departure from their previous stands on Pakistan's India policy. It is to be noted that their sudden rise in the national politics has served to moderate their chauvinistic viewpoint on India and Kashmir. Speaking on MMA's foreign policy outlook, Maulana Fazalur Rehman assured the world that if MMA formed government it would not bring about any major policy shifts in country's foreign policy vis-à-vis India and Western countries.

The statement was made following apprehensions in the West that MMA's holding of power could endanger their stakes in Pakistan. It is also interesting to note that Maulana's comments on reconciliation with India have been more than moderate. He is also one of the politicians who visited India and met Indian PM during his New Delhi visit and here at Islamabad as well. This is no small development and can be helpful in reaching out to hardliners.

Secondly, mainstream political parties especially PPP and PML-N are known for their flexible positions on India. PPP has done well to welcome the reconciliation process initiated by President Musharraf that speaks of party's

stan into submission can succeed as is proven by the failure of Indian jingoistic policy employed in post-Nine Eleven period. Benefiting from the international circumstances and anti-terrorism drive in the world, India tried to paint Pakistan as promoter of terrorism and hence deserving to be declared as terrorist country. It moved its half a million forces on the Pakistan's border to make Pakistan surrender. But all its efforts went to naught with Pakistan refusing to dot the Indian line.

The futility of the Indian policies could never be more marked. This has paved the way for the resumption of a normal sort of relationship with Pakistan and resort to negotiation for the solution of all issues including Kashmir. Secondly Vajpayee wants that his name should go down the history books as a peacemaker who tried to bring about peace in the troubled region. Thus his wish to achieve peace can be an added advantage in carrying the dialogue forward to a meaningful end.

Another factor that is quite positive in this regard is the international pressure that is nudging both Indian and Pakistan along the path of reconciliation and negotiations. The world knows that huge catastrophe would follow if India and Pakistan were left to fend for themselves. Hence great international interest in the settlement of all issues through dialogue.

There is also a realisation in the Indian power circles that Indian thrust for greater role on the world political spectrum is being hampered by its continued confrontational relationship with Pakistan. Indian Establishment now thinks that if it solves all the issues or at least starts a process for reduction of tension with Pakistan, a great impetus would be provided to its march for a greater role. So India is definitely looking for a sort of modus operandi for ensuring peaceful relation with Pakistan.

In view of these encouraging developments, there is now hope that Pakistan and India can lay to rest their strained past and make a new beginning. The way both sides are coming down from their maximalist positions plus great caution their respective leaderships are exercising should make us hopeful that great future is on the cards. Full credit to General Musharraf and PM Vajpayee for giving peace a chance.