

Pak. F.R. India  
15/1/04  
The News

# Islamabad Declaration: history in the making

## General Mirza Aslam Beg

The ice has perceptibly melted and the much-strained Indo-Pak relations, creating a morbid geo-political climate are showing some positive facets. The 12th SAARC Summit and the consequent Islamabad Declaration may prove to be a watershed event for peace in South Asia. This is markedly different from the summits held in Lahore in 1999 and in Agra in 2001. Even though these were peace overtures but not many preparations were made to ensure their success. Conversely, Islamabad Summit was the outcome of serious deliberations. The 'Peace Plan' was kept highly secret and even the track two diplomats, and the media did not seem to have any inkling of what was going on behind the scene. Only a small coterie, comprising the Indian foreign minister Mr Yashwant Sinha, Mr Tariq Aziz of Pakistan and Mr Brajesh Mishra from India were the key players in the peace game. The National Security advisor of India, Brajesh Mishra was perhaps the lead catalyst in this respect who had reached Islamabad, a few days earlier to remove the procedural bottlenecks. This shows, India's ability to institutionalise the mechanism of its National Security Council, to evolve sagacious policies, having bearing on critical national security interests.

Islamabad Declaration, therefore, is the result of such preparations, notwithstanding Pakistan's flexibility and open-arm approach for the furtherance of peace in the region. Pakistan's endeavours for promoting peace, will undoubtedly be appreciated by the global community which is rightly apprehensive of the consequences; should the relations take on more ominous form. Mr Vajpayee has unfolded his political agenda, using all the instruments of diplomacy, to achieve a breakthrough. In fact, he has taken a daring step; placing his politi-

cal career at stake, by saying: that "he would resign if he failed to achieve a breakthrough". One cannot, but appreciate his commitment and his vision for the cause of peace, and his firm belief, that, the peace process initiated at Islamabad "will open a new chapter in the troubled history of South Asia."

The Declaration is not an outcome of any single determinant, as momentous decisions of such nature are usually multi-causal. Various compulsions have generated the visible dynamism. The foremost is the futility of confrontational gamuts, which have been plaguing South Asian region. Now, there is an unequivocal realisation that economics is the dominant force in the new global order and the neglect of economic imperatives is dangerous and the nations of the world would do better by paying due attention to the economic factor so vital to preserving national sovereignty and prosperity. Endowed with this insight India and Pakistan have acted to build a conducive environment for dialogue, knowing fully well that the "Line of Control cannot be turned into a permanent border", nor the "option for an independent Kashmir" can be the solution. Such an approach, no doubt, may alienate a segment of Hindu extremists but, will win-over the Muslim populace, a considerable fourteen per cent, and duly compensate for the likely loss of support in the coming elections. And, very rightly, Mr Vajpayee has decided to follow the election theme of "peace and amity with Pakistan" as against the previous policies of "confrontation with Pakistan", for the forthcoming general elections.

India's emergence as an economic power is predictable but the dream cannot be realised unless it cuts down drastically on its troops commitment in Kashmir and military ambitions, which run counter to the peace initiative. The peace initiative no doubt, contains a degree of objectivity to ensure its workability and plausible use of the emerging opportunities of achieving

the economic wellbeing of the South Asian region. India, therefore, sought to compartmentalise the SAARC objectives and the Kashmir issue. In the matter of SAARC, India has emphasised the regional economic cooperation on the basis of SAFTA and has proposed economic unity, open borders and common currency — the objectives to be achieved in a period of 10-15 years. On the Kashmir issue they have agreed to initiate Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), preparatory to engaging in a serious dialogue on Kashmir, beginning with the coming month. This is indicative of the seriousness of purpose. Both sides appear malleable, reflecting a clearer vision of the current imperatives and the dire need to solve the enormous range of problems facing the region.

There are positive portents of the Declaration, but at the same time it is prudent to keep in view the pitfalls and apprehensions that may come its way, thwarting the peace initiative. Both countries must also pay due attention to the prevailing animosity at the level of radicals, and the pseudo-intelligentsia whose unconsidered remarks and actions may become contributing factors in spoiling the peace process. It is clearly discernible that the masses on both sides of the border crave peace. They must not be disappointed yet again.

The most sensitive aspect to be considered by both sides is that the people of Kashmir must not be ignored or sidelined at any cost as they are the final arbiters. An imposed decision will not be palatable for the Kashmiri people and their inclusion in the peace process is at the root of a lasting peace in the sub-continent. The failure of Oslo and Camp David Accords occurred because of forced decisions on the Palestinians. Triateralism is a better option than bilateralism. Decisions taken to the exclusions of the Kashmiris will alienate them from the process and will prove counterproductive

for the deliverance of peace. The recent statement by Pakistan's foreign minister and the leader of the ruling party, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain: "we are willing to look at options other than the UN resolutions" is tantamount to giving something, which one does not possess. Such options can only be exercised by Kashmiris, who are relentlessly struggling and sacrificing for their legitimate rights. Pakistan should avoid making such pretentious statements, without taking Kashmiri leaders into confidence. Already the Islamabad Declaration has shown serious discrimination, by adding a chapter on terrorism, placing the entire onus on Pakistan — to disallow, use of its territory for cross-border terrorism — while there is no mention of Indian state terrorism, in occupied Kashmir, which continues, unabated.

The peace process needs to be institutionalised. In case of India, the National Security Council provides the advantage of institutionalised decision making on national security issues, while in Pakistan, it is essentially personalised. The momentum for peace must not be allowed to remain an initiative of just the two individuals — President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee. The heightened threat facing the two leaders — a failing health and desperate attempts on General Musharraf's life, must also remain at the back of the mind with the planners. The vested interests would spare no efforts to block the peace process, by unpredictable means.

India has to take yet another vital policy decision. They have to opt for either of the two contemporary stratagems — 50 years of peace and prosperity — the Chinese choice, or 50 years of hegemony and domination by use of military and economic power — the US ambition. On this choice, hinges the fate of the people of the subcontinent.

The writer is Chairman FRIENDS  
fr786pak@isb.comsats.net.pk