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A political alchemist

THERE is an ideology that is universal and the evidence lies in every greeting card. In October, hundreds of millions of Hindus sent Diwali greetings; in November hundreds of millions of Muslims did the same for Eid; and in December hundreds of millions of Christians had the same message for Christmas.

One simple phrase was common across continents, cultures, religions, languages: we all wished one another 'peace and prosperity'.

It is easy to believe in prosperity. Even those politicians who sabotage prosperity pay lip service to it. Peace is a different matter. It must compete against the muscular rhetoric of war. What chance does a dove have against an eagle? The eagle has perched on the banner of empires from Rome to Washington. Has any nation been so foolish as to provide its standard-bearer with a dove to hold? The dove might flourish in Picasso's hand but those who paint Guernica are not given the helm of nations.

The gods of war have, understandably, given peace a bad name. They have advertised it as a synonym for submission. They hint slyly that it is sentimental rather than hard-headed. But peace is anything but sentimental. War is the tool of oppression. Peace is the ultimate objective of every sense of security. Peace is a dove with steel talons.

It is a relationship

NOTES FROM DELHI

By M.J. Akbar

years old, but Vajpayee sought a thaw across the Himalayas and made a vital visit to Beijing. He also eased the terrible strain in relations with Pakistan created by the wars of 1965 and 1971, principally by easing the visa regime and encouraging cricket between the two nations.

Morarji Desai as prime minister took all the credit and was even awarded the Nishan-i-Pakistan by General Ziaul Haq, but the initiative was Vajpayee's. (Morarji had a variant approach to foreign affairs. He believed for instance that Indira Gandhi made a mistake by ensuring the creation of Bangladesh: it was not Bangladesh that was liberated from Pakistan, he believed, but Pakistan that was liberated from Bangladesh. Thirty years later the view is at least worth examining.)

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tious, but not cynical. Vajpayee was cautious when he left for Pakistan.

Just before Pakistan's high commissioner in Delhi, Aziz Ahmad Khan, left for Islamabad in late December to join his delegation for Saarc and the attendant bilateral talks, he went for a highly unusual meeting. He called on Vajpayee and his trusted confidant, national security adviser Brajesh Mishra. The meeting could not be kept a complete secret, but it was shrouded in silence.

It is reasonable to assume that every step of the diplomatic tango that took place in Islamabad was carefully choreographed. But wise men never travel without an insurance policy in their pockets, and Vajpayee, having lived through Kargil and Agra, took no chances. Word was deliberately put out that nothing much would happen. The body language on arrival was polite rather than cordial. The embrace at departure signalled that much had been achieved, and more was in the works.

Why? One very good answer is because Musharraf was now ready for a positive response. Again, why? There is tacit agreement that the cost of confrontation has taken too heavy a toll on two generations, and should not be visited upon a third. An age of economics has replaced the ideologies of conflict. People want a peace that brings prosperity. This is not a sentimental conclusion.

In India voters have rejected the rhetoric of confrontation and are demanding good govern-

between equals. It is not an equation from algebra, for no two nations can find the precise symmetry of myriad factors that will create the algebraic balance. Peace is better defined by another word that derives from Arabic, alchemist (the Arabic al is added to the Greek kimia; for those interested in trivia, alcohol is also originally from Arabic, a variation of al-kohl). Peace is a solution found in chemistry, the dream of a political alchemist.

The ranking alchemist in politics is surely Atal Behari Vajpayee. When was the last time that an executive head of Pakistan paid such fulsome tribute to a prime minister of India? When was the last time that Indian and Pakistani leaders embraced one another as warmly as Vajpayee and Zafarullah Khan Jamali did? It was not the kind of act you can put on. President Pervez Musharraf was sincere when he gave credit to Vajpayee's "vision, commitment and flexibility" for the breakthrough in Islamabad in the first week of January. Each of the three words is significant: we will understand the extent of the flexibility over time, but there is no doubt about vision and commitment.

Remarkably, nothing in Vajpayee's past prepared him for such a future. He has been part of an ideological movement that sought to marginalize India's Muslims and then confront Pakistan after it was created. He grew up in the Jana Sangh before becoming the father figure, and now the indispensable vote-winner of the Bharatiya Janata Party. There were signs along the way that while he was of the party, he also had a vision that raised him above it.

He could not restrain his tears at the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964. When the mistakes of Indira Gandhi enabled him to become foreign minister in 1977, he used his three years in office to set a liberal agenda for his country. In 1977, the memory of the Indo-China war was only 15

India? When was the last time that Indian and Pakistani leaders embraced one another as warmly as Vajpayee and Zafarullah Khan Jamali did?

When more than five years ago, a series of silly miscalculations by his opponents enabled Vajpayee to become prime minister, he set out to implement a simple but powerful vision for his country and the region: peace and prosperity.

His own party faithful had problems with this vision. They were apprehensive, to say the least, of any deal with Pakistan, and they were vociferous about the means Vajpayee adopted to reach a measure of prosperity. Curiously, hardline elements in the Hindutva family spoke the language of socialists and *swadeshi* to sabotage the exceptional thrust to liberalization that is now producing results.

Peace really has only one definition in the context of the subcontinent: peace between India and Pakistan. If the two cooperate, the seven nations of the Saarc can hope for a way out of their poverty. We have seen what happens when they do not.

There are moments when one feels both overwhelmed and underwhelmed. The opportunities that await the region through peace are astounding. But it has rained so often on the parade of events that India and Pakistan now protect themselves with nuclear umbrellas. So why should a free-trade zone by 1 January 2006 be nothing more than a mirage, two more years within which we can all fool ourselves? Why should the joint statement in which Pakistan gave a commitment that no territory under its control would be used to foment cross-border terrorism be nothing but a piece of paper, a means to extend the conflict by other means?

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nance. They are not partisan about it. They defeated the Congress where it could not deliver, and put it back in power where it could. Vajpayee ordered his party's campaigners not to demonize Musharraf in their search for votes in the crucial recent Assembly elections. In

Pakistan, the massive outlay on the military is visibly affecting economic progress. There is a genuine 'feel good' factor across India: when both Sehwaq and the stock exchange start hitting high numbers, you have every right to feel good. Pakistanis want their economy to move at the same pace.

Vajpayee has placed the options before the subcontinent clearly and candidly: choose between rational economics and petty political prejudices. Choose between mistrust and trust, accord and discord, tension and peace. Open the borders, he said, and have the courage to dream. If Europe could defeat its history to become the model for the future, why not South Asia?

Goodwill, of course is not good enough. Kashmir as a problem will not disappear. Musharraf has made it equally clear that India and Pakistan have to heal a wound that has turned septic. Vajpayee has delivered on his side of the commitment: there will be three rounds of talks at the level of foreign secretaries in February alone. We do not know what will happen, but we have a clue. Vajpayee told Pakistan Television that in his view Kashmir has never been discussed between the two countries as honestly as it should be.

The strategies of peace are more complex than those of war. The process will take its time, but the parameters have been fixed: there is space at this round table for anyone with a grievance, but without a gun.

No one ever drew a gun on a greeting card.

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