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# A great leap forward

The contrast could not be greater. During Kargil and last year's eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, people were confused, worried and depressed. But in the first week of January this year in Islamabad, there were jubilant faces, optimism and excitement. This change in emotional tone speaks for itself.

People prefer peace to war, friendship over enmity, and love over hate. Not everybody is thrilled though. There are professional provocateurs whose bread is buttered through hate mongering who are raising doubts or putting in caveats to confuse the masses. They should be ignored. Then there are some people who cannot believe a good thing even if it hits them in the face. They deserve pity.

Opposition parties are finding it difficult to construct an appropriate reaction. They hate Musharraf and yet he has done a good thing. Their dilemma is, what to do? There is only one answer. They should react maturely and responsibly. They should praise the good and attack the bad. PPP and PML (N) should take a cue from their leaders. Both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto are pro peace. Their spokespeople in the country have no business to sing a different tune.

General Musharraf has come a long way since Kargil. It has not been easy for him because years of institutional indoctrination are hard to transcend but he has. He was raw at Agra and let a great opportunity slip by. He has not made the same mistake again. In more ways than one, he has come of age and that is a good thing. Whether we like it or not, he is here to stay and it is better to have a leader who knows his business than a neophyte struggling to find his feet.

One example of maturity is the preparation before the summit. This was sorely lacking at

Agra. Back channel contacts are important and they were initiated. Modalities were worked out and trust established. Without trust among leaders, nothing can move forward. The Indians don't completely trust Musharraf and there are some doubts in Pakistan about Vajpayee and his RSS background. Both are unfounded. Musharraf and his colleagues have come to the considered conclusion that peace is the best bet for Pakistan. The Indians should understand this and start trusting him, however messy the past.

Vajpayee has demonstrated again and again that he is a man of peace even though his background is less than perfect. He broke the ice in 1999 by coming to Lahore on a bus and significantly and symbolically visited the Minar-e-Pakistan. This was wise and brave. Again, he broke the post Kargil logjam by inviting General Musharraf to Agra. Unfortunately, this did not work out and later there was the 13/12 bitterness when the Indian parliament was attacked. Both states nearly came to war after that and were frozen in hate until Vajpayee once more made the opening through his Srinagar speech in April 2003. This man has a vision of peace in the subcontinent and wants to leave a lasting legacy of harmony. He should be trusted and we should do business with him.

What is particularly heartening is the common resolve on both sides to do the doable and begin a dialogue on the more difficult issues. This is wise. For too long, normalization has been hostage to a final solution in Kashmir or lately to the stopping of what the Indians call cross-border terrorism. There will always be issues among neighbours; some more intractable

than others. The trick is to build on the positives and discuss the negatives until a solution is found.

The composite dialogue in February should proceed within this framework. The doable must be done immediately. Let us start more trains and more buses. Let us allow the movement of goods across borders. Let us make the visa regime rational and allow tourism to flourish. Let us remove bans on TV channels or other media products. These steps do not require protracted

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India and Pakistan. There are many elements of this process. For example, let us begin by demilitarising Siachin. There is no point in losing lives and money in that place anymore. Once this is done, we can move forward to withdrawing forces from the Line of Control so that the danger of accidental conflict is reduced.

Of course, to demilitarise the LoC there is one essential requirement. There must be no infiltration across it. General

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negotiations. They can be resolved and should be resolved without delay.

Meanwhile let us start talking about Kashmir. It is important to understand that a final solution will not come about in a hurry. Those who believe this will be disappointed. What we need to look for is a meaningful process that reduces difficulties and problems for the people of Kashmir and also gives lasting benefit to

Musharraf in his press conference has already made the pledge not to allow Pakistani territory to be used for terrorism. This is as clear an indication as any of crack down on Jihadis and should create the space for demilitarization. Then there is the question of free movement of peoples across the LoC. The divided families and others must have the opportunity to visit each other.

A corollary to this process

could be the allowing of tourism from Pakistan to Kashmir. At the moment it is a no-go area and adds to the irritation felt here. If the dialogue on Kashmir were able to resolve some of these issues, it would bring about a qualitative change on the ground.

So there is much to discuss on Kashmir besides the modalities of a final solution. This is not to say that it should be set aside for ever. It must be discussed and mulled over but resolving difficulties in Kashmir should not be made a hostage to the final solution. Fortunately, in Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri, we have a

wise head in the foreign office. An old hand at the track II process he understands the nuances and the difficulties. He will steer a sensible course.

General Musharraf has deservedly acclaimed his performance during SAARC amongst others. He was able to establish a hearty camaraderie with his counterparts and yet vigorously protected our national interest. Have no fear; he will do the right thing. In the beginning of this 21st. war is an orphan. People want to get on with their lives without worrying about bombs and guns or nuclear holocausts. The peace process initiated during the SAARC summit promises a better life to one billion people in the subcontinent.

There will be no easy path to rapprochement between India and Pakistan, as whenever there seems to be a prelude to application of sweet reason, the forces of malevolence put their shoulders to the other side of the gently opening door. But it now seems that the governments of India and Pakistan are willing to apply their own hefty shoulders to keep momentum going. It would be unwise and even futile

to bring too much pressure to bear, and we must hope that the process is as effective as it must be gradual.

It is understandable that Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf should have reached accord on the first steps of the way forward, because neither took an intransigent position. Agra failed because Islamabad and Delhi thought they could ask too much, and the sides learned from that experience, so it was far from being a wasted exercise, although many bewailed the 'lost opportunity' of the time. Well, we were wrong, in the end, because another opportunity arose and they took it.

Their joint statement was prudent, in that it took the wind out of the sails of extremists in both countries by refraining from precision. Some people are critical because there was no mention of Kashmiris themselves in the communiqué, but, when one thinks about it, this tactic was wise. If no firm position is taken on a particular point and this one is political dynamite then there is no excuse to adopt a contrary posture.

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India and Pakistan are on course to diminution of hostility. Musharraf and Vajpayee have shown great courage in leading their countries on the path towards reconciliation, and we should salute them.