

What generated the peace momentum

Pak. F. F. Datta - India

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

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THE 12th Saarc summit held at Islamabad attracted worldwide attention on account of the role it played in putting back on the rails a peace process between India and Pakistan. The participation of prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, and his meetings with president Pervez Musharraf, and prime minister Jamali were the centrepiece in an event that raised new hopes for a meaningful dialogue between the two nuclear neighbours.

More than a year had passed since the end of the military confrontation in October 2002, with a significant push given to the momentum for peace by Mr Vajpayee's announcement in April 2003. People-to-people contacts had started, and some preliminary steps taken towards normalization, by the return of the High Commissioners in mid-2003, and the resumption of the road link between the two countries. However, the Indian government continued to link the resumption of a composite dialogue to the end of "cross-border terrorism" that it accused Pakistan of encouraging by facilitating the infiltration of Kashmiri extremists across the Line of Control.

The negative attitude of the BJP government was ascribed to the dominant role of the hard liners, headed by Mr. L. K. Advani who had played a key role in ensuring the failure of the Agra summit

answer lies in a combination of domestic and international factors that have not been in evidence simultaneously in the recent past.

The stabilization of the internal situation in Pakistan has certainly contributed towards the momentum for dialogue, as the successful conclusion of the prolonged negotiations between the ruling party and the MMA virtually ensured that Pakistan could negotiate from a position of strength. Indeed, the need to project internal harmony in the face of efforts by the BJP government to impose its own will, was a major factor in promoting readiness to compromise.

Regional and international pressure had also mounted on the two traditionally hostile neighbours to resume dialogue. As earlier delays and uncertainties pertaining to Saarc, arising out of the Indo-Pakistan tensions had held back its progress,

civil and military officials in Islamabad to work out detailed arrangements for controlling "cross-border terrorism" by Kashmiri militants.

That a meeting of minds was reached on this issue was reflected in the stress laid by President Musharraf, in announcing the agreement to resume talks, that Pakistan would not allow its territory to be used for terrorist attacks against India. New Delhi reciprocated by stressing the need for a sustained dialogue that would address all issues between the two countries, including that of Jammu and Kashmir.

It may be recalled that an eight-point agenda for a dialogue was agreed between the two countries that would be pursued in such a manner that progress would be allowed wherever possible, for instance on trade, without demanding simultaneous progress on more contentious issues such as Kashmir.

The Saarc summit recorded its main progress in terms of the agreement on the South Asian free trade area (Safta) that was accompanied by a decision to increase intra-regional trade. Pakistan ended its reservations on the grant of most favoured nation (MFN) status to India. Indeed, Prime Minister Jamali reiterated Pakistan's offer to provide guarantees for passage of oil and gas pipelines from Iran and Central Asia to India that could confer enormous economic benefits on India.

For its part, India has shown readiness to further improve communication links, and the concept of opening the road from Muzaffarabad in Azad Kashmir to Srinagar in

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in July 2001. This faction also appeared to be keen to fan anti-Pakistan feelings to help improve the chances of its electoral success within the country. Perhaps the continuation of deep differences between the main political parties in Pakistan also encouraged the adoption of a tough stance by New Delhi.

The concluding months of 2003 saw signs of a considerable thaw in the relations between the two countries. The successful conclusion of negotiations between the ruling PML (Q) and the opposition MMA (grouping of religious parties) resulted in an historic compromise that broke a year-long deadlock. As a result of this, the president accepted some key demands, and was sworn in as the constitutional head of the state by the national and provincial assemblies in the closing days of 2003. The stage was set for Pakistan to play host to the Saarc summit with a political setup consonant with true democracy.

The first week of 2004 witnessed the preparatory meetings of the regional grouping in Islamabad that were marked by a generally shared desire to infuse new dynamism into it. Prime Minister Vajpayee not only participated but also adopted a stance towards both Saarc and Indo-Pakistan relations that could not have been more positive.

The most crucial meeting on the sidelines of Saarc was the meeting between President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee at the conclusion of the summit, following which it was announced that India and Pakistan would resume their composite dialogue on all issues, including Kashmir, from February 2004.

President Musharraf announced this "historic breakthrough" at a special press conference in Islamabad.

Recalling that two earlier initiatives by Mr. Vajpayee in 1999 (bus summit at Lahore) and 2001 (leading to Agra summit) had been followed by heightened tensions, why has the current resumption of dialogue generated so much optimism? The

moting readiness to compromise.

the other members, and in particular Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka made known their unhappiness over the two major member countries obstructing the progress of the entire region. As India had adopted a cavalier attitude towards Saarc in the past, the main brunt of criticism was borne by New Delhi.

Pressure had also mounted from major international powers on the two countries to move more expeditiously towards resuming a dialogue, on which Pakistan had been insisting, while India was justifying its reluctance on the grounds of continued "cross-border terrorism" by Pakistan.

The international community had taken note of President Musharraf's persistence in seeking a dialogue, accompanied by an insistence that no military solution was possible for the Kashmir dispute. His proposal that both sides should move away from their traditional positions, and look for solutions that might be acceptable to India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir also captured the imagination of those seeking to promote peace between the two nuclear armed neighbours, which had both kept improving their nuclear and missile capabilities. The US and China in particular had used their leverage to facilitate the resumption of dialogue.

The primary objection by India in resisting the pressure for resuming a dialogue had been that Pakistan had not matched its commitment to prevent infiltration by the militants across the Line of Control with determined measures. Rather, it seemed to suit Pakistan to keep the "pot boiling" in Kashmir that was keeping a high proportion of India's armed forces tied down in the disputed territory.

Pakistan not only offered strong assurances, but also quietly facilitated a visit to Pakistan before the Saarc summit by Brajesh Mishra, national security adviser to the Indian Prime Minister who met senior

Indian-held Kashmir was agreed in principle.

Some modalities of co-ordinating arrangements with UN observers may need to be sorted out before this important decision can be implemented. Similarly, Mr. Vajpayee expressed his hope that the Saarc region would eventually have a common currency, which can only be a distant target, but the very reference to the idea reflects India's seriousness in regional integration.

The changed international environment, in which both India and Pakistan are viewed as allies in the war on terrorism, acted as a major influence on them to resolve their problems peacefully. The efforts by the BJP government to get Pakistan condemned as a terrorist state appeared misdirected as Pakistan was itself facing terrorism. Indeed, some militant groups had even tried to assassinate President Musharraf. This may have become an additional inducement for both governments to move decisively towards dialogue.

Despite the favourable factors that confer greater promise on the resumed dialogue, the past history cannot but arouse fears that the move for an historic reconciliation may become derailed. The wide divergence on the core issue of Kashmir may again result in a return to confrontation.

The primacy of economic and social progress that is needed by a region containing half the globe's absolutely poor would have to be kept in view by the two governments.

Continued and positive interest by major powers can be the other key ingredient to allow the peace process to continue. The US government has announced that it will remain engaged in promoting the quest for durable peace between India and Pakistan. Similar interest by major players, such as China, EU, Russia and the UN would be helpful in maintaining the peace momentum the Saarc summit has generated.

The writer is a former ambassador of Pakistan.

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