

Beyond Saarc summit

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THE 12th Saarc summit held after a two-year delay because of India's intransigence, ended in Islamabad on January 6 on a positive note. The 43-item Islamabad Declaration was adopted. The collective wisdom of the leadership of seven states has generated hope for a better future for South Asia.

The member states signed ten-point Saarc social charter, reached agreement on South Asian free trade area (Safta) and agreed to combat terrorism. The Saarc social charter aims at improving the social condition of the people in the fields of education, health, human resource development, poverty alleviation, drug rehabilitation and integration of the minorities. These goals are noble, easy to articulate and hard to implement because of the prevailing prejudices and practices.

It will need immense political courage and great administrative skill to overcome the constraints of history and tradition that have so far hindered the social uplift of the poor segments of society in South Asia. About 30 per cent of the 1.4 billion people who inhabit this region live below the poverty line. South Asia needs a social change and the living standards of the people should be improved drastically and speedily.

Pakistan demonstrated its ability in holding the high-level meeting in a befitting manner. Its considerable experience and expertise in holding such meetings was never in doubt. However, two attacks in quick succession on the cavalcade of President Pervez Musharraf, just before the event, created speculations. The administration took extra security arrangements. The blue book should be periodically updated for providing adequate security to our top-level leadership. Their periodic movement between the twin cities is inconvenient, risky and

a part in converting East Pakistan into Bangladesh. It then claimed that India had avenged the insult of one thousand years of Muslim rule. The Rann of Kutch agreement was followed by war in 1965. The Simla Agreement was violated in the Siachen glacier region. In 1986-87 Pakistan blunted Exercise Brasstacks based on the coercive diplomacy. The euphoria of bus journey and Lahore Declaration was overtaken by the Kargil crisis.

It is not the intention here to revive the memories of the bitter past. India and Pakistan have suffered too much for too long. The peace process should succeed in the interest of regional peace and well-being of the two peoples. Initiation of bilateral dialogue is only the first step in the right direction. Let us not jump to the conclusion that it will succeed. Both countries have extremist elements who preach policies based on confrontation.

It takes two to tango. Vajpayee's sincerity may not be in doubt. But he may not be the decisive policy-maker in the ruling coalition government in India. The failure in Agra shows that the hawks in the Indian cabinet did not approve of the draft agreement jointly prepared by the foreign ministers of both countries and approved by the prime minister of India and the President of Pakistan. This puts to question Vajpayee's ability in carrying his team with him on complex issues. And, who knows what lies ahead. By the time an agreement is hopefully reached, Vajpayee may or may not be the prime minister of India. He has already announced his intention of retiring from politics after the Indian elections.

BJP has laid its political sights on winning the Indian election

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unnecessary. Why keep the residential suite in Aiwan-i-Sadr unoccupied?

The Saarc summit once again demonstrated, if at all a proof was needed, that Indo-Pakistan relations dominate this regional alliance. For how long will a single country keep Saarc a hostage to its own ambitions and ego? The Saarc charter should ensure that all Saarc meetings are held on due dates and without any interruption. It must send loud and clear signals of the sovereign equality of all member states. Besides, it must generate greater confidence in smaller states about the usefulness and efficacy of Saarc. The European Union and Asean work smoothly because the interests of smaller states in them are protected and the large countries show tolerance towards them. Two years ago India sounded red alert and deployed its forces on the border of Pakistan. Pakistan responded in kind. It is time to analyse the cost-benefit ratio of the madness that promoted the concentration of troops of both the nuclear-armed neighbours in South Asia. The government in New Delhi used the pretext of the so-called terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 for amassing troops.

A former chief of army staff in India states that India's ruling political masters took the wrong decision. How much price the two countries paid for that wrong decision is worth a study by some experts.

A joint statement issued in Islamabad states that India and Pakistan have agreed to hold composite dialogue in February 2004 on all contentious issues including Kashmir. This welcome decision reflects the vision and courage of the policy-makers and it has been globally hailed as historic and path-breaking. One sincerely wishes success to both the countries in the difficult task that lies ahead for them.

In the past Indo-Pakistan relations have frequently followed one-step forward and two-steps backward course. If experience is a guide, optimism is fine but euphoria is best avoided. While hoping for the best, one should be prepared for the worst. A carefully mixed brew of optimism and caution may pose fewer hurdles in the path of peace. The negotiating journey will be hard and hump-ridden. Euphoria may lie at the end of this process.

The Indo-Pakistan history is rich in misplaced optimism. Swaran Singh-Bhutto talks in 1962 failed. In 1971 India played

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due this year. With India's economy doing well, the prospects of normalization of relations between India and Pakistan may help in luring the Muslim voters towards BJP. Present indications are that Vajpayee will call early elections to take advantage of the prevailing favourable situation.

Result-oriented negotiations with India demand considerable homework, negotiating skill, political finesse, and patience. Internal cohesion and national unity on fundamental issues will strengthen the hands of the policy makers and the negotiating team.

The people must be taken into confidence and they should have complete trust in the ability of those who will undertake this arduous responsibility.

The president did well to brief Kashmiri leaders and assure them of Pakistan's commitment to associate them with the process. This process should be maintained. The issue should also be discussed in the Parliament and in the media. While it is premature to speculate about the end-result, it is already crystal clear that the result will sell only if it is fair, amicable and acceptable to the concerned. And, remember that a bad result will be worse than failure.

National interests dictate inter-state relations. Personalities influence the process with policies and vision. While leaders come and go with time, national interests on basic issues usually remain constant. Pakistan's time-tested Kashmir policy enjoys national consensus and is clearly defined. We may engage in negotiations with an open mind while remembering that long-time strategic interests must never be compromised for the sake of tactical gains.

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