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Indo-Pak relations: an expose

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The recent thaw in India-Pakistan relations, and more recently, the detention of nuclear scientists, has led to a flurry of editorial activity. As expected, the debate on these important national security issues remains sharply divided. There are some who have regarded General Musharraf's peace overtures towards India as bold statesmanship. Others have termed this as another incidence of caving in to external pressure. The debate has broadly been cast in terms of presenting arguments for and against peace with India.

But despite the burgeoning editorial commentary, the current discourse somehow bypasses the core issues confronting Pakistan's national security. The question is not whether to make peace with India, but how to make peace. It is clearly important to debate the wisdom of a particular decision, but in a poorly functioning democracy like Pakistan, a much more important question is how important decisions are made. In particular, it is important to ask if decisions of national importance are supported by institutional dialogue and national consensus or if they are simply edicts handed down by a coterie of individuals. Do our decisions reflect a deep institutional thinking or they are exigencies imposed by a changing external environment? Answering these questions remains central to ensuring Pakistan's security in the twenty-first century.

Let us be clear on this. Friendly relations between India and Pakistan are a need of the hour. A peaceful coexistence with India is a necessity, not an option. In fact, there is little to choose here. We are condemned by geography. Our founders wanted these nations to live in harmony with each other and to respect each other's differences. But over half a century, Kashmir has remained a festering sore in our mutual relations. It is only reassuring that we are finally taking the first steps towards resolving our long-standing dispute.

But as we extend our hand for friendship, we must ask ourselves if our diplomatic posture is consistent

with principles of self-respect and dignity. Or is it the case that we are cobbling together a solution under duress. We can rest assured that if India comes to the negotiating table, it will only do so if it considers it to be in its best national interest. Our case is somewhat different, however. Refusing to learn on our own, we are often brought to the negotiating table under gunpoint.

Apart from our pseudo-liberal elite, it is quite clear to every one that the current diplomatic engagement on Kashmir is being negotiated on India's terms. Anyone doubting this should read a selection of Indian commentaries. For instance, an Indian commentator, Swapan Dasgupta, wrote in a recent article: "Diplomatic niceties and a sense of generosity have propelled India's assertion that the joint statement that commits Pakistan to ending state-sponsored terrorism in return for a composite dialogue on all outstanding bilateral issues is a win-win for both sides. Yet the fact remains that this agreement to allow negotiations to prevail over armed conflict constitutes a negation of everything Pakistan has stood for since the Kashmir Valley erupted in 1989. It is a U-turn that is far more awesome in scope than Musharraf's decision after 9/11 to abandon the Taliban regime in Afghanistan."

Since the current regime came into power, it has been bending over backwards to bring India to the negotiating table. Its desperation on this count has been outstandingly conspicuous and has been noted by foreign policy observers from Delhi to Washington. No wonder then, just to secure a promise for talks it had to declare a unilateral ceasefire, sign up for the free trade accord, disavow our long-standing stance on UN resolutions, and renounce support for the armed insurgency in Kashmir. Who will call it statesmanship to reveal all the cards before we even come to the negotiating table?

Some of these changes were clearly long overdue. For instance, there was a case for rethinking our strategy of supporting the armed insurgency in Kashmir. In the post-9/11 world, maintaining this kind of support has often been termed as a strategic liability. But instead of being

driven into action from external pressure, why don't we exercise our options at the right time?

If our current military leadership was so restive to bring India to the negotiating table, why did it disrupt the Lahore peace process through the Kargil adventure? For all his ills, Nawaz Sharif was at least pursuing a more dignified course. He hadn't yielded, for instance, even half of what our incumbent General already has. If we had to equate the freedom fighters in Kashmir with terrorists (that is what the terrorism declaration practically does!), why did we throw all the precious money into this project? And what about losing our valiant soldiers in the Kargil battle? Have their sacrifices gone in vain?

Perhaps the most critical issue in Pakistan's national security discourse today is the absence of adequate institutional structures. Regardless of whether a decision is right or wrong, it is important to streamline the process of decision-making. In more democratic societies, state policy emerges from a process of institutional dialogue. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, a few people at the top take decisions of national importance with limited, if any, consultation. For ex post rationalisation, the services of ISI-sponsored security intellectuals are often readily available.

For a stark example of such arbitrary decision-making, we need not go far back. A few weeks ago, our President caught every one by surprise by declaring to forego the UN resolutions on Kashmir. The Indian response was instructive and displays the clear difference in the decision-making process of two countries. Instead of loud proclamations, Prime Minister Vajpayee held a two-hour long meeting with his security cabinet. The resulting statement from the Indian side welcomed the Pakistani flexibility without any reciprocation. India, as Yashwant Sinha described, still considers Kashmir to be its integral part!

Thanks to decades of American subservience, our global reputation is one of a state that makes decisions only when America breathes down its neck. Our current engagement with India also seems to be driven by external pressures rather than a serious

institutional thinking. Agreed. Friendly pressure from external powers like the United States and EU can be a helpful inducement - and such outside pressure has often been important to make enemies talk. But the problem is that the United States has never been a neutral third party in our dispute with India. For its own very legitimate reasons, the United States has chosen India to be its long-term strategic partner in Asia. For this, one need not go beyond reading official pronouncements and foreign policy documents emanating from the myriad Washington think tanks.

Clearly, it would be unrealistic to claim complete parity with India or to alter the strategic maps in Washington, at least in the near term. To add to our difficulties, the external environment in the post-9/11 world isn't very helpful either. But nothing can be further from truth than to argue that Pakistan has no option but to surrender to every American demand. With vision and independence, we can chart our own course ahead. Reasserting our independence and dignity doesn't require antagonising the United States. In a world of growing interdependence, we must be prepared to accept some pressure from outside. But we must also be willing to exert some pressure in return by being steadfast on our principled stand.

Pakistan's most critical constraint at the moment remains internal, not external. A regime that lacks domestic legitimacy and is pretty much surviving on American crutches has little to bargain for, except perhaps for its own survival. General Musharraf's rule since 1999 has made it abundantly clear that it is difficult to think of national sovereignty without domestic sovereignty. The two are inextricably tied. The President was right when he warned last month that the main threat to Pakistan comes from within, not outside. But his statement needs to be amended to include not just sectarianism, but also the absence of representative democracy and the frequency of military interventions.

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