

# A personalised war?

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**H**e (President Musharraf) talks of the oppressed people of Kashmir. These same people very recently cast their ballots in an election universally recognised as free and fair. They defied the bullets of the terrorists, aided and abetted by Pakistan. Those very terrorists assassinated candidates and political activists in the elections and killed women and children because they refused to provide them food and shelter. They continue to perpetrate violence against innocent civilians every day." Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"I would like to extend a note of friendship that we would like to resolve disputes. We want to get into a dialogue with India on all issues. We want to address them in a sincere manner. I only hope that we can clap because one hand is there and the other needs to come." Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Since the collapse of Agra Summit in July 2001 to the verbal skirmish between the leaders of Pakistan and India at the 13th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in February 2003, Indo-Pak relations are primarily a victim of personal egos of President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee. What the two leaders said in Kuala Lumpur at NAM summit proves that there is a little possibility of any improvement in Indo-Pak relations unless the personal rhetoric of Musharraf and Vajpayee is reduced. Since Agra summit, the two leaders said things in their statements that indicate personal grudge and hostility rather than an objective approach to the dynamics of Indo-Pak relations. One billion people of South Asia have been taken hostage to the personal grudge of Musharraf and Vajpayee and the narrow interests of the ruling elites in New Delhi and Islamabad. Does it mean that New Delhi-Islamabad relations cannot improve till the time either Musharraf or Vajpayee remain in power? Since there exists personal dislike and rhetoric against each other because of historical reasons, Indo-Pak relations will continue to be captive of personal egos of the two leaders.

What went wrong between President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee that they are not even ready to greet each other, share perceptions on critical issues facing the people of India and Pakistan and sit together for the resolution of unresolved conflicts. Is there any personal discord between Musharraf and Vajpayee or are the vested interest groups on the two sides using minor ego problems of the two leaders to sustain the wedge in Indo-Pak relations? If seen in other cases, when there is personal grudge and ego at the leadership level of hostile countries, the outcome is the perpetuation of cold war and bitterness.

Even if people of two countries are not hostile to each other, continued personal dislike between their leaders is enough to justify the suspension of normal relations for a long period of time. As long as the Chinese leader Mao Tse Tung and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev were alive, Sino-Soviet relations remained at a low key because of personal rivalry between the two leaders. Similarly, personal schism between the Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad and Jordanian monarch King Hussain prevented cordial relations between the two



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Arab neighbours. But with the demise of the two leaders, one can see a marked improvement in relations between the two countries. The role of personalities in determining the priorities of foreign policy is important and till the time an element of sanity and maturity is lacking, the outcome is sustained cold war. The same principle applies to India and Pakistan.

If Agra Summit is taken as a yardstick to prove personal polemics between Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf, three factors must be taken into account. First, the summit began in a cordial and pleasant atmosphere. Soon the media coverage of President Musharraf started to embarrass Prime Minister Vajpayee because the manner in which the Pakistani President was projecting his coun-

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try's case on Kashmir before the media, including the Indian media and that too on the Indian soil, was unacceptable to New Delhi. Vajpayee blamed Musharraf for breaching the trust by revealing the contents of discussions between the two countries. This resulted into the non-issuance of a joint declaration and the failure of the summit. For the Indian Prime Minister, it was highly un-diplomatic on the part of Pakistani President to talk to the media when official talks were still on. Since then, Vajpayee has even launched personal attacks against the Pakistani President. Taking advantage of his age and experience, Vajpayee has said things about Musharraf which no sensible and responsible leader would like to utter. For instance, immediately after Agra Summit, Vajpayee called Musharraf irresponsible in dealing with matters that required distance from the press. Musharraf never attacked the person of Vajpayee but in his press conference after returning from Agra said, "We should respect him because he is almost twice my age."

Second, the confident and articulate personality of President Musharraf overshadowed the fragile and unimpressive personality of Prime Minister Vajpayee. Soon, media began to compare the personalities of Musharraf and Vajpayee and start passing judgment in comparison. It was also argued on the occasion of

Agra Summit that Vajpayee refused to have a joint press conference as he realised his inability to face the press in the presence of President Musharraf. Soon after the conclusion of Agra Summit, the two leaders accused each other of wrecking the talks.

Third, personal polemics between Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf took another turn at Saarc Summit in Kathmandu in January 2002. President Musharraf went out of the way to have a handshake with Mr Vajpayee, but of no meaningful use. Mr Vajpayee reciprocated Musharraf's handshake but without any warmth. Coolness of Vajpayee and Musharraf towards each other overshadowed the Kathmandu summit. At the conference of Eurasian leaders at Almaty in June last year, the two leaders didn't even bother to greet each other. The same thing happened at NAM Summit in Kuala Lumpur recently.

When President Musharraf in his speech at NAM Summit said that the legitimacy of Kashmir and Palestine cause is recognised by the United Nations and NAM must press for the realisation of these just causes and shun a selective approach to the UN resolutions, the Indian Prime Minister sharply reacted to Musharraf's raising the Kashmir dispute at the summit. Departing from his prepared address, he criticised Musharraf for not controlling cross border terrorism and blamed Pakistan for covering up its own problems.

However, as compared to Vajpayee, Musharraf offered talks to India. Talking to journalists on February 25, President Musharraf said, "We need to resolve disputes and he (Vajpayee) must trust that even though I am a military man, I am against war. I would like to extend a note of friendship that we would like to resolve disputes. We want to get into a dialogue with India on all issues in a sincere manner. I can only hope that we can clap because one hand is there and the other needs to come."

But it is clear that that the Indian hawks have managed to poison the ears of Vajpayee by calling Musharraf as an untrustworthy person. When President Musharraf telephoned Prime Minister Vajpayee on October 7, 2001 — the day the US-led coalition attacked Afghanistan — and invited him to visit Pakistan and extend support to Islamabad at that critical juncture, Vajpayee failed to reciprocate.

It seems the personal dislikes and egos of Musharraf and Vajpayee can be singled out as the fundamental cause of prevailing standoff between India and Pakistan. Otherwise when Vajpayee had invited Musharraf for talks at Agra, things were not as bad. It is also possible that the straight and clear talk of Musharraf on the Kashmir dispute is the major source of anger in New Delhi because no Pakistani leader in the past has shown the courage of raising the dispute at international fora. It is the need of the hour that Musharraf and Vajpayee mend fences and rise above personal egos. The two leaders must realise that if they failed to act with responsibility and maturity, they would plunge their countries further in the darkness of poverty and backwardness, both economic and social. Personalised war between Vajpayee and Musharraf must end as soon as possible.