

Prospects of real peace

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THE last three weeks of December 2003 and the first two weeks of January 2004 were remarkable for Pakistan and India in terms of their foreign policy as well as national politics. The events that took place during this period, hopefully, will have a long-term positive impact on their internal situation and that of South Asia as a whole.

In spite of the fact that many CBMs were adopted before the Saarc summit, a pall of tension and uncertainty hung over the area until the first week of December 2003. While it looked highly probable that the summit would take place on the appointed date it was not a forgone certainty. India had not formally conveyed Prime Minister Vajpayee's participation though the Indian foreign minister had told the media that he would. Then came the two fortunately failed assassination attempts at President Musharraf, both in Islamabad-Rawalpindi area where the summit was to be held. That caused serious concerns in New Delhi about the security of Premier Vajpayee and raised questions whether or not he should attend the summit. When the Indians removed that doubt by reconfirming his participation, they left every one guessing if Mr. Vajpayee would hold any kind of bilateral meeting with the President of Pakistan.

In the event, the summit was held without any untoward incident and Premier Vajpayee not only made a very positive statement but also held an hour-long meeting with Musharraf and a separate one with Prime Minister Jamali,

Besides reaching a conceptual framework the two leaders would need to take some concrete measures to maintain the momentum of detente achieved recently. For example they must put a stop to mind poisoning state controlled propaganda as soon as possible, open the consulates in Karachi and Mumbai and relax the visa regime. Hopefully Prime Minister Vajpayee will be able to hand over the Quaid's house to Pakistan in Mumbai as a goodwill gesture. Greater people-to-people contact and growth of bilateral tourism will not only reduce mutual antipathy but also make a significant contribution to the two economies. In any case without these steps opening of the road, sea and air links would become meaningless and a cause of useless expenditure. Pakistan has already proposed the dates for talks on opening the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Khokhrapar-Munabao route for bus service. Hopefully these will succeed in the very first round.

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violated the Simla accord when it occupied the Siachen in 1983-84. That is true but the fact is that Simla was signed by Pakistan in the wake of a military defeat and whatever steps it took thereafter to normalize relations with India smacked of duress, a kind of Versailles. Moreover, after the military coup of 1977 in Pakistan, the overthrow of President Daud in Afghanistan in 1978 and the Soviet invasion of that country in 1979, Pakistan got too heavily involved in the menacing situation on its western frontier to be able to pay much attention to the issue of Kashmir. As such the peace that prevailed during that period was more like an armistice than real peace. And that too came under severe strain by India's mindless move on the Siachen and the Brasstack subsequently. Hence 1972-89 did not usher in a period of real rapprochement between India and Pakistan, an essential precondition for an amicable negotiated settlement of the core issue of Kashmir. The present situation is different.

After the nuclear test and Kargil Pakistan feels more confident.

As for Siachen it was undoubtedly a mindless and senseless act since it gave India no military or intelligence advantage as Kargil later proved. The Indians should therefore do some soul searching and ask themselves as to what did they achieve by moving into Siachen except to provoke Pakistan, lay the ground for Kargil, squander hundreds of millions of dollars on retaining a piece of frozen wilderness and sacrificing the lives of thousands of their brave soldiers. Yes, Pakistan too had to pay a heavy price but it was not browbeaten into accepting Indian hegemony. In fact if Siachen had not happened and cre-

who seem to have conducted the conference to the satisfaction of all the participants. It was quite obvious from the start that without a Vajpayee-Musharraf bilateral meeting the summit itself would become meaningless because normal relations between India and Pakistan hold the key to real progress among the Saarc countries. Happily for every one the meeting turned out to be more than a mere courtesy call by Prime Minister Vajpayee, and the two leaders seem to have achieved a better understanding of each other's problems, difficulties and limitations.

But does it mean that the possibility of another derailment of Indo-Pakistan relations has been eliminated for good. Seen in the light of the history of their relations it will be naive to reach such a complacent conclusion even though things are looking much better now than they did any time before. So what are the factors against which these two leaders must maintain a constant vigil to prevent another slide of the Kashmiri Sisyphus stone from yet another summit of hope to the abyss of tension, confrontation and a scenario of doomsday like armed conflict?

First of all, they must change their own mindset and that of their hardline supporters that there can be a military solution of the Kashmir issue. Negotiations alone, no matter how long they may take, hold the hope of a real breakthrough. Second, in case of complex issues like Kashmir, which involve national honour, huge sacrifices and peoples' emotions, solutions are seldom found, they just emerge. Third, where there is no possibility of a military solution, compromise and give-and-take is the only way out. The talk of a "principled position" is only good to save face but not a realistic option. Fourth, President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee would need to replace the mistrust generated by Kargil and at Agra with trust and goodwill for which they must remain in constant touch. An occasional telephone call may help to remove misunderstanding and promote mutual confidence.

Restrictions on TV channels and promotion of cultural exchanges are self-defeating measures. Fear of cultural invasion is irrational. The two communities lived together for a thousand years and 140 million Muslims are still living in India without either losing their religious or cultural identities. They cannot lose it now by merely watching TV programmes or cultural exchanges. Moreover, the information technology of today has already demolished all the cultural barriers. Indian movies and song and dance programmes and Pakistani dramas and Ghazal cassettes have already reached the remotest of places in the two countries where there is electricity. Therefore, these restrictions have served no purpose and will not serve any except to maintain tension at the official level.

Two more important points need to be understood. 1) There is no point in making a demand which the other side cannot accept. For instance India's demand that Pakistan should surrender the twenty wanted men alleged to be involved in acts of terrorism in Mumbai, and Pakistan's demand that India should stop building the fence on its side of the LoC cannot be met. It is useless to ask why. They simply cannot be met, at least not for the time being, full stop. Insisting on these will only indicate an attempt to stymie the negotiations. 2) The history of past negotiations should caution them not to be in a rush to start the composite dialogue because they will soon get entangled in the most complex issue of Kashmir and undermine progress on all other fronts, particularly CBMs which are indispensable prerequisites for improvement of relations and resolution of the Kashmir issue. It is only after the CBMs have become irreversible that the issue of Kashmir will lend itself to a solution.

Many critics of this approach would say that Pakistan followed it for more than a decade and a half, between 1972 and 1989, but it produced no progress on the Kashmir dispute. As a matter of fact India

ated the impression of India colluding with the USSR when it threatened Pakistan's security, probably a real detente would have developed and prevented the near war situations caused by Brasstack, the long armed militancy in IHK, the Kargil and all that followed later.

Since Siachen has turned out to be such a costly mistake for both, it would only be sensible for both countries to begin tackling the Kashmir issue by simultaneously withdrawing their troops from there and demilitarizing the area permanently. If nothing else, it would save many precious lives and millions of dollars that are direly needed for alleviating poverty in a region that has gained the sad distinction of having the largest number of poor people anywhere in the world.

And that sad reality should govern all their future decisions unless they believe that tension and consequent heavy expenditure on defence plays no part in accentuating poverty. In this respect clearly the onus to promote confidence among its neighbours by reducing defence expenditure lies on India as it is already too powerful to be threatened by any of its neighbours including China. And if India is building its military power on behest of its new strategic partner the US, then it is making the world more dangerous than secure for itself. In any case the anticipated cold war between the US and China for which the Bush administration's neo-conservatives needed India before 9/11 now seems unlikely to develop in the light of the mess that the US has landed itself into in Iraq. And if it is to gain a permanent seat in the UNSC or become a member of G-8, then India should concentrate on becoming an economic rather than a military world power. So whichever way one may look at it, India's current high-speed arms build up, manifested in the recent deal to purchase the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Gorchkov, appears not very sensible.

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