

# Why a needless controversy?

By Anwer Mooraj

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THIS has been an interesting fortnight. On the home front an incredulous public has heard a proposal for a US-style federation. And across the border, a politician with a reputation for airing strong anti-Pakistan sentiments has proposed, for the second time, a confederation with Pakistan.

The two issues are distinct and based on different considerations. What is, however, interesting, is the timing. The world is in turmoil. No country is safe. Former compradors of US imperialism, the Taliban and the Iraqis are in total disarray. The former are being hounded by their erstwhile allies, like infected pariahs, and the latter, barring the odd show of defiance, stand mournfully, a picture of somnolent and dejected resignation.

The European Union, formed as a counter balance to the financial hegemony of the United States after the destruction of the Soviet Union, can't agree on a leader. The Japanese, sworn to pacifism, have been bullied into sending troops to Mesopotamia. One doesn't even want to talk about what is happening in Zimbabwe and the former Belgian Congo. And I have just learned that a bomb blast in Madrid has killed many people.

Against this background of uncertainty, Mr Lal Krishna Advani, the deputy prime minister of India, has mooted the idea of a confederation with Pakistan, and in the process managed to kill two birds with one stone. He has explained that the rallying cry of his party men for Akhand Bharat (a united India), does not mean the status quo ante to 1947, when the terri-

probably fallen into line, it is the two major protagonists who would have to do a lot of soul searching before they could bury a past full of acrimony and suspicion and erase a collective memory of furiously fought battles on land, at sea and in the air, between two groups of legionnaires trained by the same imperial power.

Though the concept of a larger confederation is looming in the background, the main thrust of Mr Advani's plea, in which he has been joined by Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, the famous socialist, is that India and Pakistan should take the plunge, so that others could follow. It is widely believed that the inspiration for a South Asian confederation in India came from the formation of the European Union, which, in spite of numerous hiccups, has finally taken shape.

The argument goes something like this. If a clutch of countries no larger in size than Madhya Pradesh, in a continent which has witnessed two fierce, devastating world wars, a clash of political ideologies, religious inquisitions, persecution and perpetual internecine strife, can eventually unite to form a union, why can't two Asian countries which have a common cultural background and language, and whose scale of conflict, by comparison, pales into insignificance?

It is a cogent argument, and one that must be taken seriously. But I believe the source of this sudden renewal of interest lies elsewhere, and that Mr Advani is only endorsing what he sees and hears about him.

There is a genuine desire among the people in India and Pakistan, both young and old, for everlasting peace and greater understanding between

torial boundaries of the new states had not yet been established. What he is advocating is that the three states which formed the subcontinent, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, should jointly introduce a two-tier government.

The upper tier, which is the easy part, would handle subjects like defence, foreign affairs, currency, communication and any other subject which is mutually acceptable to the three countries. And at the lower tier the three national governments would continue to look after agriculture, health, education, the promotion of culture and inter-provincial issues with their built-in irritants like the control of water, taxation and how to tackle ethnic and religious discontent.

There's nothing quite like a revolutionary proposal to jog the memory. As I sat on my lawn engrossed in the famous cases of that suave British barrister, Sir Patrick Hastings, feeling the strange air of time past stirring in the friction of foliage, I suddenly thought of another suave personality of the same vintage, who also had a keen legal mind — Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, one time head of the Congress Party. How the people who surrounded him trowelled on his charm. And how they were taken in by his glib talk.

It was Pandit Nehru who discovered a solution to the problem of the Muslim minority. What better way to permanently weaken the Muslims than by dispersing them? And so with one stroke of the pen, he fashioned his own Diaspora and divided them into three separate demographic units. It was also Pandit Nehru who rejected a similar confederation proposal which was offered by the British, and that too at a time when Mr Mohammed Ali Jinnah had accepted it to keep India united.

Just why Mr Advani has renewed his offer, particularly at this time, when India had rejected the Akhand Bharat scheme long before the hoisting of the tricolour, is a question to which there is no ready answer.

The authors of the confederation plan had, of course, widened the spectrum to include Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar and the Maldives. It was an ambitious plan, and utopian, to say the least. And though the smaller countries would have

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the former antagonists. There is a desire for greater cultural exchanges and visits. And this is in spite of the occasional sabre rattling by the men in battle fatigues, who obviously have a tunnel vision, and periodic claims on both sides of the border, that the latest ballistic missile, 'that has just been tested' can penetrate deeper and deeper into enemy territory and strike any target with impunity.

What is significant is that this desire for normalizing relations has grown independently of the various peace and goodwill delegations that have crossed the border carrying olive branches, and independently of the efforts of the cricket bodies whose verbal sparring has provided an interesting prelude to the games and heightened the spirit of competition.

Confederation between the two countries, if it does come about, will take a considerably long time. But what is significant is that a start has been made. The Indian media has recognized President Musharraf's efforts at easing the tension. And has commented on the adroit shifting of perspective, the attacks on the terrorist network and the fact that the situation on the Line of Control is considerably more relaxed than it was a year ago. One can only hope that the process of normalization continues unabated.