

: a creative India policy

Pak. F. Rel India Nation 4-3-03
Mushahid Hussain

Pakistan's interests would be better served by discarding this tit for tat approach.

pointers to a conducive environment for pursuit of an India policy by Pakistan. Such a policy must have three components.

First, Pakistan has to get the United States to fulfil its commitments made during the military standoff last year, when Washington pledged to push India to get talks started with a view to defusing tensions and resolving the Kashmir question. This commitment was made by President Bush personally during his telephonic talk with President Musharraf on June 5, and General Powell reiterated it.

The US has been pledging to focus on Palestine once the Iraq crisis is resolved. That pledge needs to be extended to Kashmir as well, given the stakes involved. In any case, there should be some strategic quid pro quo for Pakistan's support on terrorism.

Thus far, the United States has acted more as a 'fire brigade', interceding to defuse tensions and ensuring that the crises last year did not spin out of control. But, beyond that, there is need to push the Americans to fulfil their commitments on Kashmir, since there has been a reticence on Washington's part to play an active diplomatic role in South Asia.

Second, regarding SAARC, given that the organisation has been virtually held hostage to India's whims for the last couple of years, there is a need for reassessment of its role and efficacy.

On the one hand, the Indians have stated that SAARC should strictly adhere to its charter which does not allow for discussion of bilateral and contentious political issues. However, when it comes to Pakistan, India has negated the letter and spirit of the SAARC charter by refusing to participate in any meeting in Pakistan due to its hawkish approach.

Instead of allowing SAARC to simply wither away, Pakistan should mobilise other member states in the region who feel the same way regarding India's conduct. A more interactive approach with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives is called for. Additionally, there has been talk at various South Asia fora, including seminars by think tanks, for some sort of sub-regional grouping which could include China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. China has important interests in South Asia and the broader Central Asian region that borders Kashmir.

Those interests were reflected in the launch of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation but after September 11 and the American military presence in Central Asia, the SCO has become dormant.

Pakistan needs to give serious consideration to a South Asian regional initiative that can help promote and protect its interests and objectives vis-à-vis India. Third, Pakistan's India policy has largely

been based on two planks: seeking a dialogue and a tit for tat approach. As for dialogue, domestic political compulsions have driven the BJP's Pakistan policy with Hindutva hawks seeking to capitalise politically by exploiting the bigoted sections of Indian society. Hence, the Indian hard-line which remains unrelenting, more so given the state elections during the current year. The tit for tat approach is any easy way out, because it is more reactive than proactive.

Pakistan's interests would be better served by discarding this tit for tat approach and not lower itself to the levels of small mindedness reflected in the Indian officialdom's attitudes and actions. A better way would be to reach out to those segments of Indian civil society and the political forces, who oppose the BJP's bigotry. For instance, rather than responding in kind, Pakistan should be liberal in issuance of visas to Indian journalists, academics and NGOs. Such open and broad-based interaction will help in shaping perception within India that will prove positive for Pakistan in the long run. This approach will help put the Indian leadership on the defensive as well, displaying a contrast in behaviour between the two adversarial neighbours.

In fact, since 9/11, Indian animus towards Pakistan has been marked by a desperation as well. The Indian leadership assumed that they would be chosen as the principal partner of the US in the new scenario, which would enable them to club Pakistan with the Taliban and then jointly clobber both.

When that failed, they tried to cash in on incidents in New Delhi (December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament) and Jammu (May 2002 strike against a military camp) by threatening war, using coercive diplomacy to enlist the Americans to pressure Pakistan. After the defusion of those crises, they sought to project Pakistan as a country even more 'dangerous' than, say, North Korea or Iraq, knowing the US sensitivity to both the members of the 'axis of evil'.

Apart from a desire to cut its long-standing adversary 'down to size', India understands that any prolonged crisis with Pakistan over Kashmir detracts from its cherished dream for a larger-than-life global role. And as the last crises demonstrated, the Indian economy, which relies heavily on foreign investment, would suffer grievously should tensions rise with Pakistan. The last time around, it was the threatened withdrawal of all Westerners, particularly Americans, that forced India to pull back from the brink, with the nuclear factor also casting its shadow on the situation.

Now also, despite the BJP's bellicosity, occasionally Prime Minister Vajpayee has taken a different line as he did on February 20, when he ruled out war with Pakistan, contrary to the assertions of his Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani who even advocated war with Pakistan. Despite the raving and ranting of the Hindutva crowd currently dominant in the Indian establishment, and for all his weaknesses, Prime Minister Vajpayee remains Pakistan's best bet for a dialogue with India. In any case, for the foreseeable future, the Indian electorate is unlikely to vote for an Italian Catholic, heading the Congress, as their Prime Minister.

E-mail queries and comments to:
mushahid@nation.com.pk

Needed: a

In a recent media interview, US Secretary of State Colin Powell has offered his country's good offices to start a 'dialogue between Pakistan and India on all of the outstanding issues between the two nations, including the issue of Kashmir'. He added the 'United States will continue to do everything it can to get a dialogue started.'



This interview comes in the context of an impending American military action in Iraq, where Pakistan's support in the UN Security Council is being actively solicited. Solidifying support among allies is an American necessity given the sharp cleavage in the Western alliance, with European countries like France and Germany in the vanguard of resistance to the American war with Iraq. The United States realises that while it is focused on Iraq, key regional flashpoints like Palestine and Kashmir are impediments in the achievement of Washington's objectives, as well as a permanent source of instability.

Any escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan also detracts from US goals in the 'war on terror', since it is tantamount to opening a new front while the situation in Afghanistan remains fluid.

While this renewal of American interest is more tactical than strategic in the context of the Iraq crisis, Pakistan needs to pursue an India policy that has several simultaneous tracks. The geopolitical scenario is perhaps conducive for Pakistan's pursuit of such an India policy that is both proactive and unconventional, and takes into account different emerging developments. These developments include:

- * The arrest of alleged 9/11 mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Muhammed, from Rawalpindi which should nullify the negativism of those in the United States who were critical of Pakistan's cooperation regarding terrorism, even insinuating that Islamabad may be covertly holding back on its support;

- * The recent state elections in Madhya Pradesh, where the BJP's Hindutva Pakistan-bashing card failed to deliver since the Congress was able to trounce the ruling party with a decisive majority;

- * The cancellation of yet another SAARC event scheduled to take place in Pakistan, namely, the second conference of Communication Ministers, follows on the heels of the 12th SAARC Summit plus the 9th SAF Games, all because of Indian obduracy and refusal to attend any SAARC event in Pakistan;

- * The March 1 speech of Jamaat Islami chief, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, to the Foreign Office where he stated his preference for dialogue and normalisation with India rather than 'submitting to the dictates of the US';

- * President Clinton's comments to an Indian seminar also urging India to resume dialogue and criticising India for its ruling party's proclivity 'to identify and categorize people based on faith', a reference to last year's ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Gujarat.

From all aspects, these developments are positive