

# Prospects of normalization

By Sultan Muhammad Khan

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THERE is a degree of euphoria based on the telephone calls between foreign ministers and prime ministers of the two countries. The President has also spoken to Indian prime minister and Mrs Sonia Gandhi. News columns in our papers are on an upbeat note. In his latest phone call to his Pakistan counterpart, the Indian foreign minister quoted Urdu poetry:

Kuch nahi to kum se kum khwab-i-sahar dekha to hai / Jis taraf dekha na tha abtak udhar dekha to hai

One cannot help recalling that before the Shimla meeting, the Indian emissary, Mr.D.P. Dhar, who came to Pakistan had also quoted Faiz:

Aaiye haath uthaen hum bhi/ Hum jinhe rasm-i-dua yad nahin / Hum jinhe soz-i-muhabbat ke siwa / Koi but koi khuda yad nahin / Aaiye haath uthaen ke nigar-i-hasti / Zehr-i-imroz main shirin-i-farda bharde

These sentiments should be welcomed but they are not and will not be a substitute for hardheaded negotiations. We are an emotional people and often inclined to accept shadows for substance.

Without wanting to be a Cassandra, I would like to invite attention to hard realities inherent in the position of both India and Pakistan.

Let us look at the not too distant past, when Rajiv Gandhi

Natwar Singh, he is a former diplomat, who was India's high commissioner in Pakistan, foreign secretary and has authored several books. People with political ambition should not write books because whatever they write can be held against them! I have read two of Mr Dixit's books; one about his sojourn in Pakistan titled "Anatomy of Flawed Relationship" and the other entitled "India, Pakistan in War and Peace". Both are subjective and partisan. Mr Dixit writes as a patriotic Indian, finding everything right with Indian policies and everything wrong with whatever Pakistan did or did not do.

Specifically, Mr Dixit does not acknowledge that there was a genuine uprising in Kashmir in 1989 and blames everything on Pakistan's interference in Kashmir. His is a mindset that is not flexible. Maybe Mr Dixit has mellowed with the new responsibilities and might take a different view of things. I

pro-autonomy. This split in Kashmiri approach is to India's advantage.

Pakistan will be going into negotiations with less advantage than India — after all, India is in possession of more valuable territory — and would be reluctant to alter the status quo. Pakistan has already made a major concession by agreeing to 'put aside' — not abandon — its demand of a solution of the Kashmir dispute on the basis of the UN resolutions, and has expressed willingness to explore new ideas.

Obviously both sides cannot reveal their negotiating positions in advance of the highest-level meetings. Conducting delicate negotiations in the glare of 24 hour electronic and print media is a recipe for failure, if not total disaster. So we will just have to be patient and eschew speculation when serious negotiations commence.

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constructive to insist that first and foremost Kashmir must be discussed to the exclusion of other subjects. A composite dialogue has often been mentioned and simultaneous negotiations can and ought to take place on all matters of mutual benefit and interest.

Several straws are in the wind. One being a statement by the Indian foreign minister that India would be willing to consider — the word consider does not commit India — the proposal about the Iranian gas being piped to India through Pakistan if international guarantees can be provided. There

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tant past, when Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister, President Zia-ul-Haq pronounced at a meeting that he belonged to the post-partition generation, carried no prejudicial baggage and therefore the prospects for Indo-Pakistan relations looked brighter. The assembled "durbār" overwhelmingly agreed with Zia. The realities turned out to be otherwise, proving that national interests do not change with the change of personalities.

All the same, let us look at the personalities in India who would be directly and importantly concerned with Indo-Pakistan negotiations. They are Mrs Sonia Gandhi, president of the Congress Party, prime minister Sardar Manmohan Singh, foreign minister Natwar Singh, and the national security adviser, J.N.Dixit.

Lurking in the background will be Mr L.K.Advani, now the all-powerful figure in the B.J.P., Mr Vajpayee having been 'promoted' chairman of the Party. The latter is the architect of the framework under which future negotiations will proceed, but we know only too well that Mr Advani is a hardliner on Indo-Pakistan relations.

As for Mrs Sonia Gandhi, the voter confidence in her notwithstanding, her political clout is weakened by her foreign origin. This is specially so when it comes to altering the status quo in the Kashmir dispute. Negotiations involve give and take; her credentials in India will always be questioned by a vocal section of the extremists when it comes to "give", no matter how insignificant. So, she will lack the confidence of Mr Vajpayee, a former member of the RSS and a man of proven capability in safeguarding India's interests vis-a-vis Pakistan.

The Indian prime minister, Sardar Manmohan Singh, a member of the Sikh community, a brilliant economist, who finds himself in a political hot seat and will be twice as cautious as Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, in entering the political minefield of discussion with Pakistan on Kashmir. He will undoubtedly be forthcoming in other issues like trade, commerce, cultural links, travel, etc.

The third personality, Mr.Natwar Singh, the foreign minister, a scion of the former ruling family of Bharatpur, a courtly, courteous erudite, former diplomat who also served as India's high commissioner in Pakistan, has so far conveyed friendly signals for better relationship. We must take him at his word and hope for the best.

The last but not least personality is Mr J.N.Dixit, national security Adviser. Like Mr

hope he does, because he occupies a very important position enjoying close proximity to the seat of power and is in a position to influence political decisions.

There is a reference in his book on "*India and Pakistan in War and Peace*" to persistent and coercive international pressure on India — and I am sure the same applies to Pakistan — to resolve the Kashmir issue. The nuclear capability of the two countries, and Kashmir as a flash point, has aroused international interest in the resolution of the dispute and so long as significant elements of the international community, specially the US remain engaged, there is hope that a way out may be found out of the present impasse.

Dealing with the specifics, Mr J.N.Dixit lists solutions proposed at various times to resolve the dispute:

1. Accepting the line of control as the international border.
2. Revival of the UN Resolutions leading to a plebiscite.
3. A standstill agreement between India and Pakistan and placing the state under UN trusteeship to be followed a few years later by a referendum.
4. An independent Jammu and Kashmir.
5. The Kashmir valley may be ceded to Pakistan while India retains Ladakh, Jammu and other areas.

Mr Dixit rules out restoration of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in its original form, which gave full autonomy to Kashmir, as being unacceptable to both the BJP and the Congress.

After arguing against all the proposed solutions — barring one — he concludes, "India's approach should be to work towards meaningful autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir, bringing the people of the state into the main stream of Indian democratic process, with the line of control gradually converting itself into a permanent border between India and Pakistan. Efforts to achieve this through political discussions should be initiated, however long drawn the effort may be."

And one has to concede that India has the expertise and the experience in spinning out discussions endlessly.

Quite rightly, Pakistan emphasizes that any solution must take into account the wishes of the people of Kashmir. But the flaw in this stand is that the Kashmiris are not united in what they want. They range from pro-Pakistan, to pro-independence to

Pakistan if international guarantees can be provided. There is also the vague possibility that a solution reached by defence secretaries of India and Pakistan on Siachen in the '90s may be revived. That agreement was aborted at the technical and military level by India.

Then there are the perennial issues of Sir creek in the Rann of Kutch and the Wullar barrage in Kashmir which will come up for review. These and issues related to commerce and industry should all be taken up in the forthcoming negotiations as of course also the Kashmir dispute, which after all is the basic issue between the countries which dominates all other issues.

Before serious negotiations ensue at the level of the president, prime minister, there may be opportunities for the two sides to take soundings in an informal setting, where advisers are not present, to explore how far each side is willing to go in search of peace in the region. Another Agra will be worse than the last one. And this is where the role of the US will be crucial as a peace broker. Undoubtedly both India and Pakistan have their hardliners and extremists who will disagree and object to whatever compromise emerges finally, and their capacity to create obstacles should not be underestimated.

Both India and Pakistan will ultimately have to accept that "there are always two sides to a conflict and peace is possible when both sides are prepared to acknowledge this. But once you believe that you are fighting for God against His enemies, there can only be one point of view and anything that opposes this becomes monstrous and evil." (Karen Armstrong in *Holy War*).

In conclusion, both parties will be guided by what they deem to be in their national interest. But is national interest served by a seemingly perpetual dispute that drains valuable financial and human resources bilaterally and regionally obstructs material progress affecting the lives of millions of people.

All worthwhile agreements under Saarc await the restoration of normalcy in the Indo-Pak relations. It can hardly be justified in the national interest of India and Pakistan that millions of people be condemned to live in misery deprived of food, shelter, education and health facilities. For too long both sides have played politics with Kashmir. It is time for statesmanship to take over in the higher national and regional interest.

*The writer is a former foreign secretary.*