

Can terminology tip the balance?

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By M.J. Akbar

IT is of course entirely coincidental that Pakistan will soon join India in making an IMF alumni its prime minister. While reasons vary, this reflects, at least partly, a growing urge in the developing world to place men at the top who are honest, efficiency-driven and committed to economic reform.

At the top, but not at the very top. The political class that has permitted them to rise has given them the responsibilities of office but denied them the privileges of political power. Both Shaukat Aziz, when he becomes PM, and Dr Manmohan Singh, who has already been sworn in, have a boss. One is the president of the country, and the other is president of a political party.

In Pakistan this works, because there is no confusion about the limits of democracy. Power in Islamabad grows out of the barrel of the gun, and therefore remains clearly in the grasp of President Pervez Musharraf and the corps commanders who keep him in the chair. If the Pakistan prime minister wants to set policy, he knows whose permission he must take.

Delhi is different. The prime minister is the fountainhead of power because he, or she, is in office by virtue of a popular mandate. But since the last general election threw up a complex jigsaw puzzle, Dr Singh got the job that should have gone to Mrs Sonia Gandhi.

Ideally, a prime minister in India should be the first among equals in his cabinet. But for some of his senior colleagues, Dr Singh is less than equal. They

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such a view is Mr Natwar Singh's colleague in the new government, Mr J.N. Dixit, foreign secretary under Mr Narasimha Rao and national security adviser to Dr Singh. He might have warned Mr Singh about the quicksand at the centre of the Shimla Pact.

Bhutto came to Shimla with nothing in his hand except perhaps a wild card or two. He was leader of a nation that had been physically divided and psychologically decimated. The Pakistan Army was shattered after the humiliating surrender to India, and nearly 100,000 of its personnel were prisoners of war.

The Shimla pact did end the war, but it did not initiate a peace. Many commentators have noted that Mrs Gandhi won the war against Gen Yahya Khan in 1971 with adroit skill but lost the peace against Bhutto in 1972 with inexplicable feebleness. One prominent individual to hold such a view is Mr Natwar Singh's colleague in the new government, Mr J.N. Dixit, foreign secretary under Mr Narasimha Rao and national security adviser to Dr Singh.

He was in power for five effective years after the accord. How many times did he visit India for such negotiations after he had got the signature on the accord, all his PoWs back and peace on the western front at a time when the Pakistan Army was in its worst shape? Naturally, not once. Instead, he rebuilt the strength of the Pakistan military services with much help from his nation's friends, and secretly initiated the nuclear programme that has enabled Pakistan to become a nuclear power.

The consequences of the Shimla Non-Agreement have been evident in the last three decades: insurrections in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, Kargil and a heavy price paid in blood. As for the talks, we are still talking about them.

Atal Behari Vajpayee made three attempts to break this blood-stained deadlock; in effect, to move beyond Shimla. His first,

in Lahore, was sabotaged by Kargil. His second, at Agra, was destroyed at the last minute by either deliberate will or poor planning. The third, initiated in 2003, held the most promise because both India and Pakistan indicated that they had learnt from mistakes and still retained the will to carry the idea of peace forward. It was a work in progress when the Vajpayee government was defeated. The talks between the foreign secretaries was part of the structure constructed between Mr Vajpayee and President Musharraf during their historic meeting in Islamabad in January.

A quiet but consistent effort of Indian diplomacy has been to play down, if not entirely negate, any reference to the United Nations. This has not been easy, because it means convincing Pakistan that there

is less than equal. They believe that he is a transitional figure, or even a figurehead, the winner of a lottery that he does not quite deserve. They do not accord him the courtesy, or accept the necessity, of consulting him. This has led to what could be the first gaffe of the new government.

Traditionally, the prime minister plays a much larger role in the exercise of foreign policy than he does over other departments not directly in his charge. The reason is obvious; foreign policy deals with state to state relations. Relations with Pakistan are particularly sensitive, and there has never been a prime minister who has not overseen this aspect of state policy. There are indications that foreign minister Natwar Singh chooses to keep his own counsel even on Pakistan policy. If he had consulted the prime minister's office, the joint statement at the end of the foreign secretaries' conference in Delhi in June might have been formulated with more care. But Mr Natwar Singh believes he knows more than anyone else on his subject, and that he is accountable to his party president rather than his prime minister.

Mr Natwar Singh's motives were not very complex. He wanted to establish a new framework for the dialogue between India and Pakistan for three reasons. First, he wanted his personal signature on policy. Second, he is keen to suggest that the BJP's approach was inadequate, if not amateur. Third, he wanted to pay homage to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has given him his present job.

And so he brought into play the idea that the Indo-Pakistan dialogue should be based on the Shimla pact, signed between Mrs Indira Gandhi and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1972, which brought the 1971 war to a formal end.

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There was a strong view in India that this was a moment to resolve the status of Jammu and Kashmir through a treaty that Pakistan would have to honour.

Instead it was Bhutto who had reasons to smile after the Shimla pact. The positions of the two countries on Kashmir are too well known to need reiteration. Jawaharlal Nehru went to the United Nations in 1947 in the hope that the UN would be an honest broker. It was partly out of idealism and faith in the newly-formed world body, and partly naivete: the world was still young after the bloodletting of the Second World War and the consequent collapse of colonialism. Pakistan seized on this mistake and has insisted that a UN-sponsored plebiscite is the only way out. India says a plebiscite is now out of the question, since the Pakistan army never vacated the territory it seized in the first war of 1947-48, and that a bilateral dialogue is the only way forward. Pakistan, conversely, has insisted on a reference to the United Nations Charter.

So what happened at Shimla in 1972? The reference to the United Nations Charter was retained in the pact: "That the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations shall govern relations between the two countries." More important, the accord said that the clauses would be without prejudice to the recognized positions of either side pending a "final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir". This is unambiguous.

Pakistan agreed to respect the LoC in Jammu and Kashmir, but then so did India. This becomes a restrictive clause when any suggestion is made to cross the line to stop cross-border terrorism.

A post-accord theory was floated in Delhi that the Shimla Accord is tantamount to a final settlement on the basis of the Line of Control. Perhaps Mr Natwar Singh believes that. If so, all one can say is that he has not read the details of the accord in a long long while.

Bhutto did agree at Shimla to find a peaceful solution to the Kashmir problem through nego-

vincing Pakistan that there is hope outside the UN, and that a plebiscite is now a non-starter. This was not easy, for the idea of a plebiscite has been fundamental to Pakistan's Kashmir policy. It is a tribute to Mr Vajpayee that he managed to persuade President Musharraf to drop the demand for a plebiscite. The latter first tested such a radical change in his country's position a little before the Islamabad meeting, and has been carefully encouraging Pakistani public opinion to think out of the box.

There are many reasons to regret the failure of the Agra Summit. The most important one, from the Indian perspective, is that if the Agra Declaration had been signed it would have been the first time that Pakistan had inked a document without a single reference to the United Nations. It was, in that sense, a historic departure from past Pakistani positions.

There was no mention of the United Nations at Islamabad in January this year. By a kind of unspoken consent both countries were moving away from the past that had held them back.

Suddenly in June Mr Natwar Singh has agreed to a reference to the UN Charter in a joint statement just because he wanted a wholly unnecessary mention of the Shimla Accord. The Pakistan delegation must have been laughing all the way back to Islamabad. They gave away nothing on either Jammu and Kashmir or on bilateral relations, as we have seen, when agreeing to make Shimla the framework while restoring what was being quietly, but effectively, denied to them — a reference to the UN.

Diplomats are meant to achieve win-win situations. This must go down as a classic defeat-defeat situation.

Does a change in terminology lead to substantive damage? It may not, but diplomats fight over every word only because it can.

Relations between India and Pakistan rest on such a fine balance that even a memory can tip the scales.

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