

Mending fences with India

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Qazi Hussain Ahmed, Amir of Jama'at-i-Islami, has proposed that Pakistan should mend its relations

with India provided it accepts the existence of Kashmir dispute. He has been constrained to make this proposal because in his opinion normalisation with India will help Pakistan to free itself from American bondage. It is a very thought provoking and positive proposal especially coming from the leader of a party that has usually pursued a very hawkish policy towards India and which in the past had been known for its pro-American stance.

Qazi Sahib could not have made this proposal at a more appropriate time. Currently, our relations with India are at the lowest ebb; they could not get any worse as President Musharraf has remarked. Air and land links between the two neighbours are suspended. India after recalling its High Commissioner from Islamabad has driven out our High Commissioner from New Delhi. Both have considerably reduced the strength of their diplomatic missions. Both take delight in playing tit for tat in the intimidation game against each other's diplomats. The cable operators in both the countries are forbidden to relay other country's TV channels.

Commerce and trade is non-existent. Both deny air space to each other's civilian aircraft. India has also broken sports links with Pakistan and has declared that it will not attend any international or regional event that is held in Pakistan.

India and Pakistan nurse serious grievances against each other, not only on Kashmir but also on some other issues. Pakistan has been making overtures for talks but India's consistent refusal to come on the table has intensified the impasse. Many world leaders have repeatedly urged India to start talking with Pakistan but to no effect. So, how could we switch from tension-ridden to normal relations, as Qazi Sahib has proposed, without compromising our stand on Kashmir?

Qazi's proposal has not come as an off the cuff remark. He was addressing the officers of the foreign office when he floated this proposal. The soundness of this proposal becomes apparent when we look around our neighbourhood. Iran our traditional friend has gone an extra mile to build friendly relations with India. Its president Syed Muhammad Khatami recently witnessed the Republic Day armed forces parade in New Delhi in the company of the Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee. The New Delhi Declaration signed by India and Iran envisions a 'strategic partnership' between the two. They have signed half a dozen protocols including one for technical cooperation in the defence field.

Iran has been driven by three reasons for seeking closeness to India, and to China and Russia as well. First, it needs to blunt the American menace that it has been facing since the Islamic Revolution. The US had placed Iran in the so-called 'Axis of evil' and slapped economic and military sanctions against it. And it is common talk that Iran will be next after Iraq. Second, Iran wants to build its economy on a firm foundation. For that purpose it needs trading partners and buyers of its natural gas. Third, Iran badly needs to improve and modernise its defence capabilities. Europe under American pressure is reluctant to sell military hardware to Iran. Therefore, Iran has to find new avenues to meet its defence needs.

Iran is a very strong supporter of Palestinian cause and a



Mir Jamilur Rahman

The writer is a freelance columnist

mirjrahman@hotmail.com

stern opponent of Israel. India on the other hand is building strong bonds with Israel. However, the burgeoning Indo-Israel relations do not deter Iran from pursuing bilateral cooperation with India. Israel may not like India and Iran getting closer, but India has

the strength to ignore Israel's objections. The US of course would like Iran to remain isolated and may express displeasure on Indo-Iran amity. But India can withstand American pressure and continue pursuing a foreign policy that serves its national interests best.

Qazi Sahib has not subjected his proposal for Indo-Pak normalisation to the resolution of Kashmir dispute. To set the ball rolling, he merely demands that India accepts Kashmir as a dispute. This will appear as a very significant departure from our post-Kargil stand, which insists that Kashmir is the core issue and unless progress was made in the resolution of this dispute, the process of normalisation can wait. However, it is not as significant a departure as it sounds. Until the 1965 war we had normal relations with India despite the unresolved Kashmir dispute. The 1965 war changed it all. Except for short tension-free interludes, the two countries since then

have been living on tenterhooks.

We should not comfort ourselves with the thought that America or UN will interfere on our side to help in the liberation of Kashmir. We tend to forget 1965 and 1971 when the world was divided into two camps, one led by the US and the other by the Soviet Union. The Cold War was at its peak. We were in the US camp and India had treaties with the Soviet Union. The 1965 war ended in a stalemate and in 1971 we suffered the disintegration of our country. In 1965 war the US placed an embargo on military supplies to us and in 1971 it could not prevent India attacking East Pakistan. If the Cold War could not prompt the US to intervene on the side of an anti-Soviet ally engaged in a war against a Soviet ally, then why should we expect its help against India in the post-Cold

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War period?

Normalisation with India does not entail that Kashmir dispute will be frozen and forgotten. In this regard we should take lesson from our friend China. It has neither frozen nor forgotten Taiwan. Nor it has abandoned its stand on the border issues with India and Russia. China has just put these problems on hold so it could devote its fullest attention, energies and time to the building of a prosperous nation. It has not become a hostage to its outstanding problems. It has more important things to do; the problems could wait. China is reaping good harvest by adopting this policy. It is registering the highest growth rate in the world. It is attracting foreign investment in billions of dollars.

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Talks between Pakistan and India still seem remote. The way out from this impasse could be found if the two countries start taking confidence-building measures unilaterally. Such actions may break the ice and lead to normalisation, create an atmosphere of trust and amity between the two countries.