

# India's hand of friendship?

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**S**ome of the knee jerk reactions to Indian Premier AB Vajpayee's April 18 offer of unconditional negotiations on all contentious issues between India and Pakistan, including Kashmir, have been sceptical or negative. More so, because he mentioned the usual Indian line about negotiations being impossible while cross border terrorism from Pakistan's side goes on. Isn't it proof that the symbolism of Friday's offer of unconditional talks was bogus? Well, Pakistanis have to remember some background facts.

Mr Vajpayee is India's Prime Minister and his politics is that of an old and tried BJP-RSS man. He has in fact returned to 1999 when his new government, soon after the two sets of nuclear tests and some brutal murder of Hindus in Kashmir decided to open negotiations with Pakistan. Mr Vajpayee then rode a bus to Lahore and signed various documents there with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. There were indications that the talks had gone well. But the Kargil adventure sabotaged whatever progress had been made and Nawaz Sharif was forced to beg peace in Washington and agree to basically Indian conditions. And a freeze returned to Indo-Pakistan relations.

Vajpayee made yet another overture and Agra talks resulted. These failed miserably because Pakistan expected the Indians to climb down on Kashmir while the military hostilities around Kargil had been a dismal failure. The rest of the story is known.

Following the October attack on Srinagar Assembly, there was another on Indian Parliament itself in December 2001. After Agra's failure the BJP government started a furious propaganda campaign against Pakistan and continued it for over a year. Indian authorities have kept on talking about a war during it and later defining it as a pre-emptive one. None of it can be forgotten or erased from the record. The official Indian campaign has created a vicious anti-Pakistani climate in India in which a real war, pre-emptive or not, would naturally be supported by a lot of Indians and also to enable BJP to remain in power, perhaps winning another national election a year hence.

Pakistanis cannot expect Mr Vajpayee to talk like an impartial observer or a foreigner. He has to keep his political rear safe. He has also to keep his line of retreat open, with a viable line of action in case the overture this time also fails. It is optional to expect that the Indian government will, on encountering another failure in India-Pakistan talks, fall back on more of the same: what it has been doing since December 2001 or may be it might actually go to a war. Nothing can be said for sure.

A word in parenthesis about the next and easily possible war between the two countries is in order. The conditions, based on both countries off-repeated stances, are propitious enough for a war, although a comforting conclusion can be drawn that the reasons why the Indians did not actually go to war with Pakistan last year still largely apply.

Insofar as the war itself is concerned, a lit-



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the realistic thinking is in order. India's pre-emptive war cannot now be a simple conventional foray in merely Azad Kashmir. Why? because Pakistanis have long held that it would mean an all out war and that they would fight a full fledged war with whatever they have. Therefore, the pre-emptive strike will have to be such as to cripple Pakistan's ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons. In other words, the Indian pre-emption is predicated on a sudden massive nuclear strike. Conversely also, should Pakistan find itself cornered and

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decides to make a strike, it too will have to be pre-emptive with all that it has.

Therefore war is no longer a mere deadly cricket. The nuclear dimension now ensures mutual defeat and totally unacceptable destruction. Whatever India decides, it is its business. Pakistan has no rational reason to countenance any war whatever. Ergo, it must do everything humanly possible to avoid a war. It is no time for macho talk of professional soldiers; it is time to be realistic.

To repeat, Mr Vajpayee is not suing for peace from a position of weakness. What he has said on Friday in Srinagar is an offer of unconditional talks. It was happily seized by Pakistani PM and FM as such. They were right. There is no point in insisting on looking too sceptically into the gift horse's mouth. Mr Vajpayee can comfortably live with the success in the talks as well as failure in them. Insofar as can be seen, his calculation seem to be to win a national election at the crest of an admiring wave for having befriended a long lost

brother. But he can go back with equal ease in the case of the talks failure and redouble his anti-Pakistan vitriol to win another election by in some way repeating a Gujarat. Is Pakistan equally well-prepared for failure?

This is not Pakistan's finest hour. It has had a constitutional breakdown in 1999 and a personal dictatorship a General has obtained since then. The General is now claiming to make a slow and rather halting transition to democracy with which he can live with all his jobs and powers intact as a COAS and an all-powerful President. He means to keep an upper hand over the Parliament and keep the Prime Minister as his man doing what he wants him to do. The opposition is fighting against it. There is a deadlock between the government and the opposition. The President is in no mood to make any serious concession and the opposition has probably burnt its boat by over commitment and probably cannot retreat. It is an unpromising background for serious Indo-Pakistan negotiations, no matter whether the famous centrality of Kashmir is actually respected by India or not.

**E**ven so, Pakistanis have to remember that they carry a terrible burden — of the failure of their Kashmir policy: After the sacrifice of 70,000 young men's lives and horrible human miseries in Kashmir, the Kashmiris' cause has not been advanced an inch by what is called Jihad and which the Indians call terrorism. If Pakistanis can see with a clear eye, they would find all their own trusted foreign friends in India's corner. One means Iran and China both; the Chinese too want Pakistan to negotiate with India if necessary on India's terms. The Americans and the British have already pitched in on the Indian side. It is a time when Pakistan has to change its basic policies, both in the sphere of foreign affairs and the main features of its domestic politics.

While foreign policy would naturally take care of itself after the main domestic issues have been sorted out, the central issue concerns the amplitude of General Pervez Musharraf's powers. If he is not willing to make any patriotic sacrifice by shedding some of his powers that are foreign to a democracy, the outlook would be dreary and bleak. That would not be the ambience in which a creative reformulation of foreign policy would be possible in accordance with the main thrust and sanction of a vibrant democracy. What chance can then be of India and Pakistan succeeding or avoiding sterile arms races and possible nuclear war?

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