

24.4.03  
Pak. P. Sel  
India  
News

# Change in India's attitude

**Kamal Matinuddin**

**T**he BJP government had been applying diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Pakistan since December 2001 to compel it to change its Kashmir policy. Having wasted over Rs4,000 crores of the country's resources on the largest concentration of forces along the Pakistan border since 1971, India eventually had to recall its armed forces back to their peace time positions locations without having achieved its objective.

Hardly had the war clouds moved away, India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha and Defence Minister George Fernandes, emboldened by President George Bush's doctrine of pre-emption, threatened Pakistan with a pre-emptive strike. According to their warped thinking, since Pakistan has weapons of mass destruction and is allegedly harbouring terrorists, they wanted the United States to believe that the situation in Pakistan is similar to that in Iraq. A curt reply from Collin Powell saying Pakistan is not Iraq was enough to put them in their places.

Two days later, speaking in Srinagar, Vajpayee said that India desires peaceful and friendly relations with all its neighbours. He extended a hand of friendship, saying that both India and Pakistan must decide to live together. He offered to settle all issues, including the contentious issue of Kashmir, through talks and rightfully said that nothing can be resolved through war. However, he did put a condition. "If Pakistan will close down the terrorist camps in Pakistan I will send a top foreign ministry official to Islamabad tomorrow to draw up a schedule for talks."

India's Junior Foreign Minister Digvijay Singh re-affirmed that talks can begin by June, adding, "Even one line statement shunning violence would be helpful." I am sure while making this statement he must be aware of President Musharraf's repeated statements that Pakistan does not support terrorism in any

form whatsoever.

Britain has appreciated the dialogue offer made by Vajpayee and believes that talks between Pakistan and India are necessary for resolving their differences. Pakistan too has welcomed the positive elements in Vajpayee's speech in Srinagar, offering a dialogue to resolve all outstanding issues including the core issue of Kashmir.

However, the offer should not have been tied to a better climate prevailing in Kashmir. The Afghan Jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was continuing, while the talks between the regime in Kabul and the governments of Pakistan and Iran to end the conflict were going on in Geneva. No pre-conditions were placed by either party. The terrorists activities of the Irish Republican Army did not completely end before the historic-Anglo Irish Agreement was signed in 1998. The LTTE did not lay down arms before accepting to negotiate with the Sri Lankan government. It only proves that negotiations can be held in any atmosphere if there is a will to solve disputes peacefully.

Kautilya in his book Arthshastra had advised the rulers of ancient India to keep in mind the prevailing environment when deciding on peace or war with an adversary. Vajpayee has rightly come to the conclusion that the climate after the Iraq war has changed. The international community is against the use of force to solve political disputes. The only way to improve relations between India and Pakistan is to sit across the table and sort out the dispute that has bedevilled the Indo-Pak relations for the last fifty-six years.

Musharraf had appealed to Vajpayee at the Almaty conference to return to the path of dialogue and negotiations. It is heartening to note some forward movement but what is to be assessed is whether there is a change of heart in the Indian leadership or have the sequence of words frequently used been altered. Previously it was "no talks till cross-border terrorism stops", now it is "talks" if cross-border terrorism stops.

Pakistan has done its best to stop cross-border movement. To expect it to end completely will be impractical as motivated people will continue to cross into IHK. The proposal of stationing of neutral observers along the LoC should be accepted by India if the South Bloc still wants to verify Pakistan's statement on the issue of cross-border infiltration.

What could be the cause for the change in India's approach to the core issue? Is it only to please the US officials who are due to visit the area in the first week of May? Is it because other world powers have also put pressure on India to deal with the nuclear flashpoint through meaningful negotiations? Is it because the Indian security forces in IHK are suffering casualties and have not been able to suppress the indigenous freedom movement in IHK?

**W**hatever be the reason for the present offer, even though it is conditional on stopping cross LoC infiltration, it should be welcomed by all sections of the population on both sides of the border. They are looking forward to the resumption of a dialogue between India and Pakistan. Vajpayee's bus *yatra* to Lahore and the Agra Summit had raised hopes only to be dashed to the ground by some hard-liners on both sides. It is time for these hawks to allow India and Pakistan to begin seriously thinking on living like good neighbours. Peace, security and economic development in the subcontinent depends to a large extent on the relations between Islamabad and New Delhi. They must resolve their difference peacefully to enable Saarc to make substantial progress, like other economic groupings around the world have done.

As a first step Pakistan could allow its air space to be used by Indian commercial aircraft as India has already lifted the ban on flights over India. The strength of the diplomatic staff could be gradually restored so that visa sections in both countries become operational. The *Samjotha* Ex-

press and the Lahore-Delhi Bus could also be allowed to resume even before the formal talks begin.

Progress in the talks on Kashmir and all other matters will only make some headway if there is a political will on both sides. The two protagonists will have to show some flexibility and not stick to their stated positions. The four-point approach to solve the Kashmir issue mentioned earlier by General Musharraf can be a good starting point. The old proposal of eight working groups working simultaneously on all issues can be revived. The no-war pact and the treaty of peace and friendship can be discussed again to see if there is a meeting point. Alternative solutions to Kashmir could be put on the table when some progress is achieved towards finding a final solution. The Kashmiris could be brought into the picture a little later.

Pakistan must stop all movement across the LoC even from Azad Kashmir and India must reciprocate by reducing its military strength in IHK, releasing all political prisoners there and stopping brutalities against the freedom fighters.

Musharraf is reported to have recently said, "I will stop cross-border infiltration if the United States can ensure Indian government's willingness to start a dialogue." On the face of it, Washington has persuaded Vajpayee to alter the course. If the offer is genuine, Pakistan must respond positively.

The sudden change in India's beligerent attitude has come as a pleasant surprise. What has made the Indian prime minister agree to resume a meaningful dialogue on all issues including Kashmir does not matter. The window of opportunity must not be allowed to be closed again by those who believe that only force and pressure on the adversary will achieve results. Let us for once prove them wrong. The question remains, however, is the end of terrorism necessary for talks to begin or talks are held to end all terrorism?

**The writer is a retired lieutenant general**