

Take him at his word

*News
Pak. F. Feb 04
India*

Despite the dampening qualifications and conditions that followed it, there is simply no doubt that Atal Behari Vajpayee's public address in Srinagar last Saturday represents something of a landmark. He became India's first Prime Minister to address a public meeting in the Kashmir Valley after the "azadi" movement broke out in 1989. And what he said, especially its tone and tenor — themselves suffused with human empathy — has impressed the Kashmiris and kindled new hopes. His peace overture must be heartily welcomed — and purposively followed up.

I say this despite being an uncompromising and trenchant critic of the ideology and politics of the party Vajpayee leads, and despite past experience of his lack of assertiveness against his colleagues to his own Right. Islamabad should respond to Vajpayee by taking him at his word and returning his gesture of friendship imaginatively.

In Srinagar, Vajpayee attempted a "double whammy". He held out the "hand of friendship" to Pakistan and offered a dialogue with different currents of opinion in Jammu & Kashmir. Of the two initiatives, the first is both more important and likelier to succeed far more quickly than the second. There are three reasons for this. First, Pakistan has responded positively to India's offer of a dialogue. Foreign Minister Kasuri has said: "Vajpayee is welcome in Pakistan." Islamabad hopes to work out specific dates for negotiations "within days". This is not true of J&K, where the political response to Vajpayee has been mixed.

Second, there is growing recognition within both governments that they cannot indefinitely sustain their mutual hostility. They are under growing pressure from the Major Powers to defuse it — and the potential for nuclear escalation. Only six months ago, India and Pakistan were all ready to go to war. The reasons why they didn't, basically continue to hold today. The global situation emerging after the Iraq war has discomfited both by highlighting their own vulnerability owing to the Kashmir and nuclear issues.

Washington, in its most aggressively unilateralist and expansionist phase today, has threatened to extend the Iraq conflict and also turn its attention to South Asia. Colin Powell stressed this to the *New York Times* (March 31). Russia, France and Britain too have called for an India-Pakistan dialogue.

And third, a certain momentum favouring a short time-frame for an India-Pakistan meeting has been created, with the planned visit here of US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in May. It is likely that both India and Pakistan will make positive moves just ahead of that visit. More impor-



Praful Bidwai

The writer is one of India's most widely published columnists. Formerly a Senior Fellow of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, he is a winner of the Sean MacBride Prize for 2000 of the International Peace Bureau prafulbidwai1@yahoo.co.in

tant, Armitage will probably mediate informally and "facilitate" a future summit — just as he brokered peace between the two twice last year.

This doesn't argue that a Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting will necessarily happen or succeed. After all, even one terrorist act in India, whether or not sponsored by Pakistan, can scuttle it altogether. Yet, today's circumstances are especially conducive to such a meeting. Its success will depend on how far the two governments are prepared to move away from their stated "first positions" and explore a new dÉtente.

This, in the first place, means they must accept war is simply NOT an option. Neither side can win it. According to an official report, India's conventional superiority over Pakistan has steadily eroded from 1.75:1 (in the Bangladesh war) to 1.56:1 in 1990, to barely 1.22:1 now. (The winning combat ratio is normally 2:1 or higher). And their nuclear capability is a "great leveller". Nuclear wars cannot be won; they must never be fought.

To make the summit successful, Islamabad will have to drop its conventional emphasis on a plebiscite in Kashmir and on 50-year-old UN Security Council resolutions. More important, it must verifiably give up supporting militant violence in Kashmir as an instrument to coerce India to the negotiating table. Its support to jihadi militants has done nothing to advance the cause of Kashmir. On the contrary, it is widely seen to be behaving irresponsibly and jeopardising its own interests. For instance, State Department head of policy planning Richard Haass says the US is "disappointed and frustrated" over Pakistan's failure to stop "cross-border" infiltration of militants. He warned that Pakistan-US relations "will never improve beyond a certain point unless this issue is adequately addressed."

Equally, New Delhi must drop its stated position that Jammu & Kashmir is "an inalienable part of India". The Kashmiri people must be involved in deciding how they reshape their status vis-à-vis India and Pakistan. India must take the Simla agreement of 1972 seriously, under which all bilateral issues are to be resolved through peaceful discussion. So far, New Delhi has cited the Simla accord to oppose a multilateral dialogue — but never once discussed Kashmir bilaterally with Pakistan.

Changing old stances won't be easy. But if a robust beginning is made on the basis of some mutually accepted principles, the process of reconciliation could get rolling. At times like these, process is everything.

The biggest obstacles are likely to be the hawkish lobbies in both countries, which have a stake in perpetrating a state of mutual hostility. In Pakistan, such elements have long influenced the Afghanistan and Kashmir policies, and sustained support to jihadi militants. In India, they comprise the BJP's extreme Right wing, which is hostile to India-Pakistan reconciliation.

Besides its ideological antipathy to Pakistan, this is an important election year for the BJP, which will see four crucial state Assembly elections. Rather than embark on a new, uncertain, Kashmir and Pakistan policy, it might be tempted to fall back upon its familiar hawkish line which sells well among the urban upper caste elite.

Piloting a peace process through Hindutva's snake pits will need statesmanship. Even more difficult will be India's Kashmir reconciliation agenda. Here, the government has no clarity whatsoever, although people like Vajpayee sense that J&K today offers a great opportunity because of its relatively credible election, and the installation of a state government which has generated hope with its "healing touch" — despite the impediments created by a constantly carping BJP and an uncooperative Central home ministry.

However, they are fumbling at the level of strategy and remain undecided about inviting the All-Parties Hurriyat Conference to talks. But the government should know that there is little political sense in talking only to the people's "elected representatives", most of whom have accepted that J&K's integration with India is unproblematic. It is the others it must talk to and win over.

The pertinent issue is what Islamabad can do to speed up progress towards reconciliation and an India-Pakistan summit. Any number of "negative" arguments can be constructed for holding an early summit, including warding off international pressure on "cross-border terrorism" and preventing Pakistan's further marginalisation in the context of burgeoning India-US economic relations, etc. However, the truly powerful and yet worthy arguments are "positive" ones, rooted in the value of peace and long-term dÉtente, and the building of an authentic South Asian social, economic and political community.

It is in this spirit that Islamabad should make a solemn commitment to ending support to jihadi militants in Kashmir — in ways that are transparent and verifiable. That's an offer New Delhi can't refuse.