

Resuming the dialogue

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India

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

WITHIN hours of an announcement from Washington that US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage would be travelling to the subcontinent to promote detente, the Indian prime minister announced in Srinagar on April 18 that he would be ready for talks with Pakistan as well as with Kashmir groups. Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali responded positively, saying, "we welcome it, we appreciate it."

The conciliatory gesture from India was overdue, after the expected resumption of the Agra process was stalled following the 9/11 events. Mr Vajpayee did not drop India's condition that Pakistan must stop "cross-border terrorism" but he did say that all issues should be settled through talks. "Guns will not solve the matter but brotherhood will", he said. "We again extend the hand of friendship but it has to be a two-way road". Prime Minister Jamali also said that while Pakistan stood by its stand on Kashmir, "once talks start there could be flexibility from both sides."

Mr Vajpayee's resumption of his leadership role reflects a realization in policy-making circles in India that the extremist stance of the Advani group was becoming a liability. Following the electoral success in Gujarat, the strategy of demonizing Pakistan and Muslims was not working, as evident from the results of elections in Himachal Pradesh. Furthermore, the international community could not remain indifferent to Pakistan's repeated offers of a dialogue and their rejection by India.

There should be no doubt that Mr Armitage, when he comes, will address the issue of terrorist incursions into Kashmir as well as the resumption of the Indo-Pakistan peace dialogue. This was also implied in the announcement of his visit. The high level of tension between the two South Asian neighbours has remained a source of deep concern to Washington. The US has not bought the Indian thesis that those struggling for their right of self-determination in Kashmir are all "terrorists" and "separatists." After having achieved the occupation of Iraq, with comparative ease, the US would be keen to revive its image of a peacemaker, and a backer of democracy and human rights.

The resumption of dialogue, when it takes place, has a ready-made agenda of problems that must be addressed. Since the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001, the BJP government has brought down the level of interaction between the two countries steadily. The cessation of travel by road and rail and the ban on the use of air space for flights were enforced almost immediately. India also withdrew its high commissioner, and when Pakistan did not follow suit, virtually expelled the Pakistani high commissioner five months later. The number of visas issued was curtailed drastically, and cultural and sporting links snapped.

Among the earliest steps to be taken would be the resumption of travel links by land and air, starting possibly with the lifting of ban on overflights. India had shown readiness to relax on this point, since it was much more seriously affected but Pakistan would not relent on a single issue when India was keeping up pressure on other counts. Given the stormy nature of bilateral relations and the threats of pre-emption used lately, one needs to be cautious about the prospects ahead. The influence of the hawks in India, headed by Mr L.K. Advani, will not disappear suddenly.

There was an expectation that some preliminary moves might materialize before Mr Armitage actually travels to the subcontinent in early May. As the bigger country, and the one that initiated the estrangement, it would be up to India to set the tempo for

tensions between Pakistan and India, as was made plain by Secretary of State Colin Powell. Soon after the launching of the war on Iraq, he had announced his intention of visiting South Asia where tensions had again been rising to a dangerous point. The repeated Indian threats of pre-emption reflected the view apparently held by India that Pakistan was vulnerable both politically and economically and therefore could be pressured and put on the defensive on the question of "cross-border terrorism." New Delhi has followed the internal divisions in Pakistan between the military and the political forces that want to curtail the role of the men in uniform in the running of the government.

The US regards President Musharraf as its reliable partner and has reservations about the increase in the political influence and role of the religious parties, which have reacted strongly to the US intervention, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The religious parties agitated strongly against the US invasion of Iraq, and organized "million man" marches in major cities, which the government could not oppose. The hard-liners in Washington would like to use Indian pressure on Pakistan to keep the military-dominated government in line. The propaganda that has continued about Pakistan's alleged supply of nuclear technology to North Korea makes it necessary for Islamabad to keep its nuclear assets under effective command and control.

Mr Armitage has performed well as a trouble-shooter in relation to the Indo-Pakistan military standoff, even though analysts think that India's coercive diplomacy since December 2001 has been sustained by Washington's tacit approval. He comes after the Saddam regime has been eliminated in Iraq, and Washington is considering follow-up moves. Mr Armitage will deal with two nuclear rivals, whose friendship is considered important by Washington and whose mutual hostility is fraught with enormous danger.

The next few days will be important in establishing whether the possibilities of Indo-Pakistan rapprochement will follow the dynamics of the Agra process. India's conditionalities that relate to terrorism and therefore resonate well in Washington, require Pakistan to start treating the Kashmiri struggle as terrorism, which is what India wants. The US also has not declared Pakistan a terrorist state, because of its principled political support to the indigenous Kashmiri freedom struggle. Mr Vajpayee's announcement in Srinagar had also shown readiness to interact with the Kashmiri groups struggling for their right of self-determination.

If the two South Asian neighbours do not break new ground, Washington may have to resume the role the sole superpower has played in facilitating a dialogue and preventing Indo-Pakistan tensions from getting heated up again. One cannot, however, pin high hopes on the long-term efficacy of the US role, since Washington is unlikely to favour a solution that disturbs the status quo.

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a process of detente. However, from the statements made in the Indian parliament during a discussion on the prime minister's visit to Kashmir, it appears that India is demanding certain steps by Pakistan as a quid pro quo. Two conditionalities are: putting a stop to infiltration of militants across the Line of Control and the dismantling of the "terrorist infrastructure."

These are by no means new, and one is left with the impression that Mr Vajpayee has made a gesture of friendliness but tied it to conditions that it expects to be met. The LoC lies in a mountainous terrain and it is always possible for small groups to cross it if they are determined to do so. India has over 500,000 regular troops as well as a large border security force to deal with that problem.

After India's rejection of the idea of joint patrolling, Pakistan has repeatedly suggested an increase in the strength of the UN observers of the United Nations Military Observers' Group for India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), deployed along the LoC. India has rejected this proposal too since it does not even allow the UN observers to operate on its side since 1972 on the technical ground that this is no longer the cease-fire line demarcated in 1949.

Unless India shows greater flexibility or Pakistan can give assurances that are acceptable to New Delhi, it is clear that the US might be called upon to play the role of a facilitator to get a dialogue going. Mr Armitage will be starting his visit to the region with a trip to Kabul, where the situation remains unstable. The agenda of his talks, when he comes to Pakistan, will possibly cover Islamabad's relations with both Afghanistan and India.

The US has a greater stake in reducing