

# The ball is set rolling, finally

1.5-01 News Pak. & rel India

It is not often that an event lasting just 10 minutes holds the potential to undo at least some of the damage done by nations to each other over 18 months. Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's telephone call to his Indian counterpart on Monday is a worthy candidate for that category. It reciprocates Atal Behari Vajpayee's April 18 overture, and sets the ball for an India-Pakistan thaw rolling. It shows that the recent mindless killings by militants in Jammu and Kashmir have not wrecked the optimism that Vajpayee's offer of talks has generated in both countries.

It is imperative that both New Delhi and Islamabad seize the moment. There are some positive indications that they will. Vajpayee's offer of talks has generally been welcomed in India. Its only opponents are the extreme hardliners on the Hindutva Right like Ashok Singhal, for whom even the hawkish LK Advani has become a "traitor" (to the communal cause). The general consensus in India is that Vajpayee's well-timed offer to Pakistan signals the welcome end of a long, sterile phase of official rigidity and coercive diplomacy.

By all indications, Pakistan's leaders too have made a decision to respond "positively" to Vajpayee's offer. General Pervez Musharraf's comment that it is "a good offer", to be taken seriously, is a strong sign. Even more welcome is his reported remark to a group of Pakistani editors last week that if India-Pakistan talks were to begin, the "victory would be neither mine nor Prime Minister Vajpayee's. It would be the victory of negotiation and dialogue."

According to sources from Islamabad, quoted in *The Indian Express*, Islamabad has already prepared the blueprint of a framework for a dialogue process, including confidence-building measures. It is therefore unlikely to be a mere coincidence that just hours before Jamali spoke to Vajpayee, Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat signalled Pakistan's willingness to address the most important of India's concerns — the activities of jihadi outfits.

Presiding over an inter-provincial law-and-order conference, Hayat said the law of the land would be enforced and that no one would be allowed to use Pakistan's soil for hostile activities against another country. He specifically referred to the recrudescence of banned militant groups under new names. It is even more encouraging that Jamali in his conversation with Vajpayee condemned terrorism, albeit in general terms. This suggests, to quote *The Indian Express*, that "the system" or Establishment in Pakistan has decided to pick up the threads of a bilateral dialogue.

From a long-term point of view, this could well be the first conceptual break from the de facto policy of compellence that New Delhi and Islamabad



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have both recently pursued, especially since September 11, 2001 and the Parliament House attack three months later.

India sought to bend Pakistan to its will by mobilising 700,000 troops at the border and demanding it hand over 20 terrorists on the "wanted" list. Later, it modified the demand by saying there must be a verifiable, permanent end to "cross-border" infiltration.

Pakistan, for its part, has also used coercion to try to bring India to the negotiation table on Kashmir. It responded to the Indian build-up by deploying 300,000 soldiers at the border. Both ratcheted up their war machines to dangerous levels and at least twice came close to the brink of actual combat — with a disturbing, yet acknowledged, potential for nuclear escalation. Each fully used its leverage with the United States to pressure the other.

In the event, the coercive methods didn't work. In some ways, this was only to be expected. Compellence is considerably more difficult to achieve than deterrence. Deterrence is about preventing your adversary from doing what you don't want him to do — by credibly threatening him with "unacceptable" damage. Compellence is about forcing your adversary to do what you want him to do.

Deterrence can, theoretically, work even between two relatively unequal adversaries provided they can both inflict unconscionable damage upon each other. It does not matter much if, for example, one of the two has 3,000 nuclear missiles, and the other "only" 800. (At smaller force levels too, some kind of a "deterrence equation" can exist.) Even the smaller arsenal can wipe out whole cities. In practice, deterrence, as this column has often argued, is fraught, unstable, degenerative, and prone to failure.

Compellence assumes a significant asymmetry or disproportion between rivals. You can compel your adversary to do something only if you have overwhelming superiority over him.

In the India-Pakistan case, the quality or degree of asymmetry implicit in compellence simply does not obtain. An overall conventional superiority of 1.5-to-1 or less, and a nuclear-level disproportion of, say, 3-to-1 is not good enough for this. Nor is advantage/strength in some forces or sectors, coupled with weakness in others.

Thus, even within the traditional (if flawed) "re-

alist" strategic framework, it was foolhardy of India and Pakistan to pursue a policy based on compellence — when they even lack anything like stable deterrence against each other. In reality, the dangers of attempting compellence by recklessly escalating a military confrontation are even greater because of the systemic or strategic nature of their hostility, complicated by competing notions of nationhood, territorial disputes, and domestic factors related to religion and communal conflict.

So the present turn towards abandoning coercion-centred approaches and giving serious diplomacy a chance is a long-overdue correction. The gains from this change, however tentative, must not be dissipated. This can only happen if some irreversible or hard-to-reverse steps are taken. The most important of these wouldn't be the restoration of air-links, revival of sports contacts and cultural and people-to-people exchanges, mentioned between the two Prime Ministers. These are worthy and important, but may fall short of the critical minimum required by the very logic of a return to non-coercive diplomacy.

What is necessary is the full restoration of the communications links — road, rail and air, revival of commercial relations and diplomatic relations that were severed or severely downgraded in December 2001. Apart from being dysfunctional, their discontinuation is causing enormous hardship to the two peoples without giving either government any advantage. India should unilaterally announce the restoration of all such relations as a prelude to a structured dialogue on the whole gamut of issues, including Kashmir, end of support to militancy, besides economic relations, Siachen and other matters. The two missions must be upgraded and new High Commissioners appointed.

This may sound maximalist, but it is not. The rupturing of links was a reaction to the Parliament House attack followed by the conscious escalation of military rivalry. The de-escalation of that rivalry last October and its end now entail restoration and more.

The real test of the bilateralism which India strongly advocates lies right here. If India and Pakistan do not resolutely pursue the path of reconciliation, and normal diplomacy, they are liable to invite external intervention. The coming visit by Richard Armitage and the G-8 summit in June, amidst a hardening of US position under neo-conservative pressure after the Iraq war, will generate new challenges to bilateralism.

New Delhi and Islamabad must show a new resolve to press ahead with talks — before domestic compulsions and global uncertainties complicate matters.

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# Let us talk



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Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's telephone call to Indian premier Vajpayee was a positive gesture. It could result in re-establishing the Indo-Pak contacts that were rudely severed by India in the wake of a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament. Since that deplorable incident, which India had blamed on Pakistan, it was downhill all the way. India recalled its High Commissioner from Islamabad and ejected our High Commissioner from New Delhi. It snapped the air, rail and road links and banned our airplanes from its air space. Then it sent its army to the borders with the clear intent of teaching Pakistan a lesson. It was touch and go, but good sense prevailed. India pulled back its army and we returned from the brink of a deadly war that had the potential of devastating the subcontinent.

that behoves countries possessing nuclear weapons.

The meeting between the two premiers may take some time to materialise. In the meantime both countries should start taking some confidence building measures to ease the tension. The summit meeting between the two premiers would prove more productive if it was held in a relatively tension free atmosphere. For instance, it does not require a meeting at the highest level to re-establish communication links between the two countries and resume trading neither it is a prerequisite for upgrading the diplomatic missions to the civilised level.

than the optimistic but illogical timeframe of two and a half years.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed talks sense when he says that only our military leadership has the capability to solve the Kashmir dispute. He argues that when politicians make efforts to resolve this problem their opponents accuse them of sedition and the efforts collapse. Sheikh Rashid is implying that there has to be give and take that could only be done by the military leadership because it could never be accused of betraying the Kashmir cause. Sheikh Rashid is for durable peace between India and Pak-

capitals and not via Dubai that costs much more in money and time. This is one major reason that has prevented foreign investment in Pakistan except on government level. It is a reason too that has deterred Bill Gates of Microsoft to invest in Pakistan.

Now have a look at our western border. We share 2,430 km long border with Afghanistan. It is a very small market; there is hardly any formal trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan government is still suspicious of our policy vis-a-vis Taliban. It has almost accused us of encouraging cross-border infiltration. This accusation stems from the fact that we are allowing the Taliban to use our territory to issue statements. President Bush is although very appreciative of our cooperation in nabbing the al-Qaeda members but at the same time the US State Department is apprehensive of our attitude regarding the Taliban. To be sure, Afghanistan is our only gateway to the Central Asian Republics, but we could not exploit its potential until we get our act right.

**We are heading towards a critical time in our relations with India. At this juncture the presence of uniformed President Musharraf is essential. It is essential not because he is indispensable — nobody is indispensable — but because as Sheikh Rashid has said that only the military leadership enjoys the confidence of the people in resolving the Kashmir dispute**

It is generally expected that the 10-minute telephonic conversation between Jamali and Vajpayee would lead to a dialogue between the two estranged neighbours. The prospect of talks has brought great relief to the people from both sides of the border. It is evident that people are weary living under non-stop tension. They want a break from the incessant stupid claims being hurled by irresponsible Indian and Pakistani leaders on the potency of their respective nuclear weapons and missiles. Which country in the world does not have troubles either with its immediate neighbour or with someone oceans away? To be certain, it is not terribly useful to become hostage to one's problems. A country would be committing great folly by putting everything on hold simply because a problem has escaped instant solution. The world would not wait for us to sort out our troubles. It would continue marching forward and the country seeking instant solutions to problems would be left on the wayside nursing its troubles.

It is good to be optimistic but only when the optimism is expressed within the logical limits. The case in point is the short telephonic conversation between the two premiers. It has raised high the hope that the resolution of Kashmir dispute is round the corner. Some leaders have even predicted a timeframe claiming that this dispute would be resolved in two and a half years. They are basing this claim on an unauthenticated statement of Jay Garner, the American martial law administrator of Iraq. The US wants the resolution of the dispute because as Secretary of State Richard Armitage said in view of their Indo-Pak situation. However, Americans are a warm-twist India on this matter and other powers can only help in Indo-Pak dialogue, but it is up to the Indian and Pakistani leaders to find a way for the resolution of Kashmir dispute, which may take much longer

istan. He says that investment climate would only improve when the subcontinent is free of the war clouds. He could not be more right.

Let the Indians assess the accrued economic damage they have suffered as a result of the war like situation prevailing between India and Pakistan. But let us count our losses. We share a 2,912 km long border with India. The communication links between the two countries are well established and modern. But there is no direct trade between these two neighbours. To be certain, the nations would not risk investment in a region that is infested with tension where war seems round the corner. Moreover, a multinational that has business with both India and Pakistan would like to do business with India as well and vice versa. It is like its executives to move with the wind. Between India and Pakistan would like to give down the road. It is a right hour to

We share 909 km long border with Iran. There is hardly any trade between Iran and us except for the smuggled petrol and diesel. In fact, neither Iran nor we have anything to offer each other in consumer goods. In the northwest we have 523 km border with China. Despite the all-weather link of Karakoram Highway our trade with China is minimal while Indo-China trade has crossed 4bn dollars. There is no way to increase our exports substantially unless we develop trade relations with our neighbours, and this holds true of every country including the USA.

We are heading towards a critical time in our relations with India. At this juncture the presence of uniformed President Musharraf is essential. It is essential not because he is indispensable — nobody is indispensable — but because as Sheikh Rashid has said that only the military leadership enjoys the confidence of the people in resolving the Kashmir dispute