

# Is army ready for peace?

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IF the feverish pitch of PTV talk shows is any indication, Pakistan and India are about to turn the corner. Perennial hostility marked by perpetual deadlocks can often induce a strange euphoria even over the faintest sign of a breakthrough. It is no surprise that the state's handy intellectuals, retired generals and ambassadors are all busy selling the GHQ's calculated climb-down from its "Kashmir First" mantra to the public. Pakistan is willing to discuss all outstanding issues, we are told, including Kashmir, of course.

No less significantly, all is quiet on the restive Islamist front even as Prime Minister Jamali has formally invited his Indian counterpart to Pakistan. The last time Mr Vajpayee was visiting, it is worth recalling, activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami had virtually set Lahore on fire.

As the CBMs (confidence-building measures) assembly line rolls into top gear, the Americans are also here to sort out our "frightening" situation. Speculations in the local press that the United States has set a deadline for resolving the Kashmir dispute have thus raised as many hopes as legitimate fears about what's next in store for Pakistan. In light of the growing American chorus on the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, questions about the fate of our much-hyped nuclear shield have gained a new momentum.

We are probably giving ourselves too much importance though. There is no doubt about Washington's desire to end the festering conflict in South Asia in line with its own geo-political interests. In the short to medium term, however, American engagement in South Asia is likely to revolve round de-escalation, normalization and ultimately, nuclear risk reduction to ensure that the two adversaries don't nuke each other by accident or miscalculation.

Backed by assurances that Pakistan will be asked to make good on its promises to plug cross-border incursions, Washington's intense behind-the-scenes diplomacy is believed to have pushed Delhi to make a long overdue overture to Islamabad. Both sides have also wilfully dismissed hopes of an immediate breakthrough, apparently on American insistence that a low-key dialogue should be put in place in advance of any visible public diplomacy. Summit diplomacy in South Asia, as the Americans know well, is too much talk and very little action. Since the groundwork has already been laid in successive rounds of high-level talks between the two sides, all Delhi and Islamabad need to do is to pick up the pieces and start anew.

Ironically for Pakistan, internationalizing the Kashmir issue — the core of its Kashmir policy — is beginning to cut both ways. India is slowly being nudged to the table but Pakistan is also under intense scrutiny for its alleged misdoings. Since Washington has now delivered Delhi on dialogue, a key Pakistani condition for ending infiltration, the onus is once again on Islamabad. It must show a serious and binding commitment not

only to halt incursions but to stop them altogether.

On the eve of his visit to the region, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has already raised the threshold by saying more needs to be done to ease tensions. Besides, a growing chorus of influential voices in official Washington has long argued that Pakistan is less than sincere in rolling back its support to armed militants in Kashmir (and Afghanistan) — a message likely to be forcefully conveyed to the DG, ISI, Lt General Ehsanul Haq, during his current trip to the American capital.

In a related setback to "our principled stand" on Kashmir, the US State Department has placed Hizbul Mujahideen, the largest "indigenous" Mujahideen group fighting Indian forces in the valley, squarely on its designated list of foreign terrorist organizations. This is as clear a signal as it can be that the time really has run out for

banks.

With the economy on the verge of collapse, Sharif invited and hosted Vajpayee in Lahore in May 1999. The military was not amused. Once bitter disagreements between the army top brass and the PM over the Kargil debacle came out in the open, and Sharif hurriedly criticized the former for not taking him into confidence, his fate was sealed.

Why is the army so keen on dialogue since coming to power? For one, a lot has changed since Kargil. While it had previously relied on elected governments to service its needs, the army has been in direct command of the economy. This has exposed it for the first time to the vagaries of the international economic system minus the benefit of unconditional American aid it is so used to. The unprecedented leverage of external actors in lightening the military's purse strings has been made possible in part by the state's pre-

carious economic situation. At the same time, the high command knows well that the international pressure to change its tack in Kashmir can only go so far since Washington still needs its support in the hunt for Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

General Musharraf is still very much the man Washington wants in control of Pakistan. Hence, there is no pressing reason for the army to abandon its institutional commitment to anti-India hostility it has so assiduously built over five decades. At this stage, tension reduction will do just fine. As long as India

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Has the Pakistan army learned its lessons? Or will it once again, as it often has in the past, throw a spanner in the works? There is ample reason to be sceptical. After all, vested institutional interests in both India and Pakistan are strong enough to scuttle any major progress in bilateral relations. The Pakistani military, for one, stands to lose its very raison d'être if the two sides mend fences in earnest.

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Islamabad-backed jihadi forays into Indian-administered Kashmir.

Has the Pakistan army learned its lessons? Or will it once again, as it often has in the past, throw a spanner in the works? One would like to believe Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri when he says General Musharraf and the army fully back his government's peace moves. There is no way Prime Minister Jamali could have even picked up that phone line to Delhi without the prior approval of his "boss". But there is ample reason to be sceptical. After all, vested institutional interests in both India and Pakistan are strong enough to scuttle any major progress in bilateral relations. The Pakistani military, for one, stands to lose its very raison d'être if the two sides mend fences in earnest. In the past, it has invariably jettisoned foreign policy initiatives taken by elected governments.

Take Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's second tenure for instance. Having borne the brunt of 58 (2) B once, Sharif had hoped to consolidate his authority vis-a-vis the military by easing tensions with India through dialogue and trade. Indian belligerence notwithstanding, the military forced his hand to detonate atomic devices in May 1998 in response to New Delhi's nuclear tests earlier that month despite opposition from within the PM's ruling party. Many "unpatriotic" politicians had favoured extracting economic benefits from the international community in return for nuclear restraint. But intent on going nuclear, the military pushed the government into a corner by encouraging its right-wing allies to ratchet up the public mood. That strategic folly invited international economic sanctions, forcing a panicked PML-N government to freeze foreign currency accounts to prevent a run on the

does not threaten open war, there is enough mistrust on both sides to help the military in Pakistan (and the hawks in India) keep things at the convenient sub-crisis level. Even the status quo in Kashmir is likely to be acceptable to the army top brass, if only away from the public eye at first, as long as it helps maintain the bilateral confrontation. This is also what the Americans want, and what they can possibly get.

Conditions for anything beyond freezing the status quo are not yet ripe. Meaningful peace will require no less than a radical change in the military's Indo-centric world view. An equally crucial factor stoking anti-India sentiments within Pakistan is the rabid anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan politics promoted and practised by the BJP. The odds against peace are admittedly high. But unless saner political elements on both sides push for a sustained peace process, militaristic hawks will continue to hold the subcontinent hostage to their whims.

Whether India can sustain a state of permanent conflict is a moot point. For us, the price tag is simply not affordable. Perhaps for the first time in fifty five years, our GNP per capita has fallen behind that of India's. Our eastern neighbour has also beaten us to the Human Development Index ranking, where we now rank close to Bhutan and Sudan in the unenviable league of the least developed countries.

General Musharraf's "take-off" blabber aside, poverty has reached such horrendous levels that the government refuses to release the latest figures. Before the post-9/11 'debt relief' bonanza is over, a country dependent on IMF liquidity injections to avoid going under should better rethink its single-minded obsession with costly and unsustainable military security. In that lies our only hope.