

Journey without visible signposts

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

*Pak. F.F. India
Dawn
26.5.03*

AT a time the peace process is being revived in Palestine through a roadmap, the Indians have taken the initiative for a peace process in South Asia amid a host of uncertainties as to their real intentions. Until the very day Mr Vajpayee made his historic gesture from Srinagar, India had maintained a tough stance, and the prospects for a move towards peace and reconciliation appeared bleak.

The hardliners in the BJP seemed determined to take a leaf out of Ariel Sharon's book to keep playing the terrorism card. Mr Vajpayee's announcement in Srinagar on April 18 that he was ready to resume talks with Pakistan was seen as a "brilliant move tactically" by George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in Washington. An experienced observer of the South Asian scene, he anticipated that the task of putting the peace process back on track was going to be a complex one.

Pakistan, which has been calling for a dialogue for a long time welcomed the move warmly. However, when Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali invited Mr Vajpayee to visit Pakistan on May 4, he politely declined to do so for the present. Since then, Mr Armitage has visited the region, but there are no clear indications as to when a meeting might be held what would be the issues to be discussed and on what order.

As has usually been the case, India seems resolved to retain the initiative on all contentious issues. So far, the emphasis appears to be on limiting expectations, so that even minor advances look like concessions from New Delhi. References have been made frequently to Mr Vajpayee's two earlier attempts to promote reconciliation and their lack of success has been implicitly blamed on Pakistan's attitude. Though his Lahore visit in February 1999 was followed by Kargil, the responsibility for lack of concrete results at Agra in July 2001 was clearly that of the BJP hardliners who rejected the finally agreed draft Declaration. India and Pakistan were all set to

resume the dialogue on the basis of the 1997 agreement on the modalities of negotiations.

Vajpayee's own statements have been cryptic. He and other leaders have kept on insisting that Pakistan must match India's keenness for dialogue with concrete measures, especially stopping "cross-border terrorism" and closing down training camps for terrorists. Mr Vajpayee does not call these demands "pre-conditions", but as "necessary" measures to facilitate progress. When Mr Armitage was here, he was given the assurance that the Pakistan government was doing everything possible to prevent infiltration and that if there were any training camps, they would be closed down soon. Mr Armitage himself conceded that infiltration had tapered off and conveyed the assurance on camps to India. Since then, while much has been stated for the consumption of the media, no formal

dialogue would begin with both sides sticking to their known positions, notably on Kashmir. Incidentally, India did not recognize that Kashmir was the "core" issue and Mr Armitage also appeared inclined to take the same position.

Given the history of conflict and lack of trust between the two countries, even an agreement on the modalities of negotiations is likely to require prolonged parleys. With the political leadership in both countries playing to their domestic galleries, some role by the US as a facilitator may well be necessary. For the resumption of a dialogue there already exists an agreed agenda that was settled in late 1997 and reiterated in June 1998. It lists peace and security and Kashmir as the two main issues to be discussed at the foreign secretary level, with six lesser issues to be discussed at the working level,

including Siachen dispute, Wullar barrage, Sir Creek, terrorism and drugs, economic and commercial relations and cultural exchanges. To these would be added some issues that have assumed prominence during the following five years.

Apart from restoration of communication links, there are some issues that are of interest to all the seven countries in South Asia, including the Saarc summit that Islamabad was expecting to host early this year. Not only the summit but also the SAF games have to be rescheduled, and these decisions could be taken fairly quickly as there are no bilateral angularities involved. Other issues, such as the building of an oil pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan, have emerged. In this Iran is

keenly interested and on which Pakistan had given the assurances required for Indian consent. A gas pipeline from Turkmenistan also interests India. Furthermore, India would be eventually be eyeing the transit facilities through Pakistan to Afghanistan and Central Asia, without which a significant expansion of India's economic and trade links with these countries may not be possible.

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A major factor in India's approach to peace process is that powerful elements in the ruling party have a political stake in maintaining a posture of confrontation with Pakistan. With several state elections coming along and national elections due in 2004, the BJP leadership appears divided on the possible impact of a resumption of dialogue on the results of these elections. The predilections of Mr L.K. Advani, who was calling the shots until recently, are well known, and while he has stated that friendly relations with Pakistan are possible, his faction

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Proceeding from the premise that the two summit-level meetings at Lahore and Agra failed for lack of adequate preparation at the working level, India is stressing that this time, the process must be carefully crafted, with preparatory meetings at the officers' level before the talks move to the political level. This suggests that the first discussions might be at the foreign secretary level, possibly preceded by preparatory work done by the newly posted high commissioners. A further assumption can be that the coercive measures that India had imposed after the December 2001 terrorist attack on the India parliament would be rescinded to restore a measure of normality India had taken those measures, including downgrading of diplo-

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Mr Vajpayee himself has shown an inclination to move with great caution and stated that after the failure of his first two peace initiatives, this one, which was likely to be his last, must be "decisive." Taking a cue from the "roadmap" the US has proposed for Palestine, the Indian foreign minister declared on May 12 that India already had its own 'roadmap' and would proceed in accordance with it. For his part, Mr Jamali has found it necessary to stress that Pakistan remains committed to its principled stance on Kashmir, which will not be abandoned to facilitate progress in dialogue with

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Quick progress or a clearly charted course of negotiations can be ruled out. Some practical measures to restore communications and to eliminate road blocks to Saarc can be expected early. Thereafter, the long haul would begin. One hears about vested interests on both sides that have a stake in maintaining confrontation. Kashmir will be the toughest issue to handle — one on which both sides have well known positions that remain totally at variance with each other. The issue of nuclear risk reduction merits early attention, and some groundwork had been done at the Track Two level. The US, which has a clear role as a facilitator, has to meet expectations from both sides, and also has an economic stake, apart from a strategic one in the post-9/11 world. While not plagued by problems on the scale of Palestine, the Indo-Pakistan dialogue looks like a slow and fitful journey, with plenty of room for doubts and misgivings. The extent of mistrust and alienation is seen in the failure even to agree on playing cricket bilaterally.

The writer is a former ambassador.