

# Engaging India at long last

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THOSE of us who have in the last few years been urging successive governments in Pakistan to take to the path of engaging India on a broad-based agenda have often been dismissed as soft liberals or pro-India. Of course, neither of these descriptions is correct.

But the more important thing is that those in government today are themselves now seeking a dialogue with India having arrived at much the same conclusion that serious talks with our eastern neighbour are necessary. And that too after having taken the longer route which in real terms is indeed the harder one.

In April 2001 Pakistan had a great chance of pulling off a direct bilateral deal at the Agra summit which politically would have shut off all the third parties that have been watching with glee or trepidation the South Asian 'tamasha' between India and Pakistan. Nevertheless, it is better late than never, because it is now pretty apparent that the public mood in both countries seems to favour a sustained dialogue between the two sides.

But one thing must be very clear: the negotiations with India are not going to be easy, particularly in view of the American nudging that is going on behind the scenes. It is indeed a prime necessity for us to take the high road to dialogue with India but surely we must also remain circumspect and not expect miracles from first contacts after a fairly long interregnum.

Without alluding to the proverbial 'baniya mentality' that is so often considered the hallmark of India, we must not forget that in the previous India-Pakistan meetings the Indians had come much better prepared than us and were able to hold their ground quite effectively on contentious issues.

In future an Agra sort of situation must never be allowed to recur. In short, the one-man show that we put up there must be avoided. It is good that this time our foreign office has shown foresight by categorically stating that talks are to be between the two prime ministers duly assisted by their respective teams of ministers and secretaries. It is indeed a good augury that politicians

In their drive towards peace in the subcontinent they feel that the post-9/11, post-Taliban and post-Iraq situations may well prove opportune for them to be able, with western support, to neutralize Pakistan for achieving their hegemonic ambitions. This situation therefore calls for far greater vigilance, dexterity and skill on our part to decide on every option and proposal before us for normalization of relations with India. Our greatest peril may well be that the forces at work at the international level today may well try to lure us into arrangements with India that may prove a trap for us in the long run.

In treading the path of safety, security and progress in the new scenario that has come about in world politics in the last few years we do need to up our antennae against new and more virulent dangers to our country under the cover of globalization, poverty alleviation, macroeconomic stability, foreign investment and the like. These are not tasks that we need to pursue in order to strengthen our survival strategy under the new international rules of the game. Our aim should be to take good care of these needs without allotting any major compromise on fundamental national interests in the process.

So in our pursuit of peace and normalization, it is essential that we do not get ourselves into a blind alley through overenthusiasm about peace prospects by giving away our trump cards. The Indians are exactly trying to pursue this line in defence of their country's long-term interests. Sovereignty is their number one consideration. One does not, therefore, see how the Indians can expect us to lower our defences. Indeed, the strength of our sinews have to be kept intact so that even without any sabre-rattling we can hold our own.

In the new regional and international scenario that is developing around us, we will have to face the situation squarely in order to meet the challenges that lie ahead. In this, the Musharraf regime's efforts to civilianize the government need to be continued unabated. The country cannot afford another setback of the sort that overtook the Junejo government in 1988 when instead of being able to capitalize on an extremely

good augury that politicians from both sides will come face to face with each other and exchange views. It will also be a great moment when the secretaries of the two countries have the opportunity to interact professionally and personally.

The fact that India-Pakistan meetings are going to be held means the beginning of greater and more frequent civilian contacts between the two countries which, I am sure, will be a great thing. With a wide spectrum of our people interacting with those of India, there is every chance of an increase in trade and tourism among many other things to follow. Naturally this will lead to the middle levels on both sides being in contact with each other through correspondence that would naturally flow out of the prime ministers' meetings.

One thing is certain and that is that there will definitely be some headway even if the bigger issues do not melt away in the course of one or two meetings. Re-establishing normal or even near-normal relations will be a slow process and therefore the difficulties must not be underestimated. In fact, our functionaries will do well if they negotiate hard and meticulously in pursuit of our national interest as Indians do in pursuit of theirs.

Our professional and other interest groups like civil servants, traders, lawyers, judges, engineers, industrialists, educationists, scientists, and journalists, all need to be kept posted with what is going on. We need to get out of any notion that we will be negotiating with India because the Americans want us to do. As a nation we should decide, on the basis of our own perception of things, what kind of equation we should have with another country and what to do and what to avoid to defend Pakistan's vital interests. Neither the Americans, nor for that matter anybody else, can tell us to abdicate our rights and interests as a nation. Inertia is always a self-inflicted malaise and its cure has to be sought by the person or nation so afflicted by getting rid of that state of mind.

Engaging India certainly does not mean that from a position of antagonism we may land ourselves into a revisionist situation. Because there are always some elements in our country who are both simple and gullible, mainly among the affluent as well as intellectual classes, who tend to fall into that sort of a trap.

There are serious thinking elements in India across the political spectrum and they are not necessarily restricted to the right-wing parties such as the BJP or the revanchist groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the likes of the RSS, the VHP and the Shiv Sena, who may well think this is time for 'overcoming' with external support what they perceive as their 'Pakistan problem'.

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advantageous situation in Afghanistan we handed that country over to the bigoted Taliban with all its attendant consequences.

So in today's circumstances, while moving towards a durable peace with India, we must not throw away our trump cards and we must insist first and foremost on mutual respect for each other's sovereignty. In doing so we must press for Saarc arrangements and not Indian arrangements in the region. We need to carry on board Sri Lanka and Bangladesh which are countries that matter but struggling to preserve themselves in tough conditions.

We, however, need to realize that the Kashmir problem can only be solved peacefully and not by military means. Our military preparedness has been costly but absolutely necessary to ensure own security and freedom of action. The example of France comes readily to mind, especially when it invested in its 'force de frappe' (its nuclear programme) in the 1950s after the coming to power of General Charles de Gaulle. This was done in order to provide the conduct of French foreign policy enough margin of manoeuvre that it needed to re-acquire a respectable place in world affairs.

Pakistan's nuclear assets are therefore an essential element in our quest for durable security. Unilateral disarmament or even reciprocal disarmament is not the solution of the security situation in and around South Asia. When the chips are down nobody comes to anyone's help. In the ultimate analysis each country has to fend for itself and Pakistan cannot be an exception to this fact of life.

Negotiate we must with India because it is our great eastern neighbour. We must indeed engage India because there is a great deal of commonality between us, which can prove mutually beneficial. One hopes the negotiators on both sides will keep in mind that this also is a moment of great opportunity for South Asia.