

Imperatives of dialogue

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NATIONS meet across a conference table to advance their national interests. More often than not, immediate political interest of one or both the governments overshadows national interests. It may not be an exaggeration to state that in the case of India and Pakistan, the ruling elites, represented by one political government or another, have kept their narrow political interests uppermost and relegated national interests to the second place.

In other words, they did not act statesman-like. Many an election was won on the slogan of intense confrontation between the two. There were efforts at making peace but there were also wars. At times no peace, no war was the official policy. The situation began to change during the last decade or more. A peace movement began building up in both the countries. Political governments perceived substantial change in the political climate. New Delhi and Islamabad concluded that they would gain in political terms by moving towards normalization of relations. Prime Ministers Gujral and Nawaz Sharif set the tone but it fell to Prime Minister Vajpayee to hold a summit meeting with his Pakistani counterpart.

The military leadership, the ultimate physical protector of civil governments in Pakistan, viewed the steps taken by Nawaz Sharif with suspicion. Then, Kargil happened. The strife between the civil and military in Pakistan deepened. Nawaz Sharif was deposed and General Musharraf assumed power. However, the logic of the need for dialogue for peace persisted and resulted in the Agra summit meeting. The change in Pakistan from Nawaz Sharif to Musharraf did not come in the way of dialogue.

The unannounced agreement at Agra was substantial enough to bring the opponents of peace and dialogue into action. As a result, the follow-up of the Agra summit was delayed, and as if that was not enough to achieve their nefarious objective, they mounted an attack on the Indian parliament, striking a mighty blow at the prestige of the Vajpayee government. Very drastic measures were taken to repair the political damage caused by the attack.

A war-like situation came into being. A million armed men faced each other across the international border and the Line of Control. To counter the pressure for resuming the dialogue, almost all links between India and Pakistan were snapped. Road, rail and air communications were cut off and the two high commissions were denuded of more than half their strength. Restrictions were placed on the issue of visas.

As things stand today, the people's forces within Pakistan and India along with international pressures are proving to be too strong for the anti-dialogue lobbies. There are positive signals for the resumption of the dialogue for the settlement of all outstanding issues. The governments may like it or not, the stand-off has to be ended. The dialogue has to be resumed.

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Politicians enter it in a sophisticated manner in the way experienced businessmen proceed to strike a business deal. For non-political persons, it is a crude "give and take" session. The ultimate aim of the dialogue is to strengthen one's political position for staying in power and winning next election. A dialogue can be just a formality should there be no political gain nor an economic or security dividend forthcoming. Even the failure of a dialogue has to be of a kind that it can be claimed as a victory.

It is a game of creating reasonably favourable perception for one's side of the polity but it should not be too lopsided as it turned out at Agra. Musharraf came out as a clear winner leaving Vajpayee a distant second, thereby creating difficulties for the latter in pursuing the matter further. In order that the results of a dialogue are endorsed by the people and parliament, both the interlocutors have to come out as winners.

Pakistan's strategy should be to convince

the world, the Indian public and especially the Kashmiris of its sincerity in establishing a state of permanent peace in the subcontinent and, simultaneously not putting the Indian leadership in a bad light in India and its own in too good a light in Pakistan.

At the moment the political climate in India favours a dialogue. Rhetoric apart, all political parties, except a section of the BJP, want India to talk to Pakistan. So does the international community. Four Indian states are going for elections in October. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, having created the perception that he is a man of peace, would like to handle the coming dialogue with Pakistan to improve the electoral position of his party. It is for Pakistan to use the occasion to extract out of India as much as it can in the effort to secure a final settlement of all outstanding issues.

The goal of achieving a final settlement can be realized if both sides, between now and 2004, are able to strengthen their political position in their respective constituencies. Towards that end, they have to give first priority to enabling the peoples of Pakistan and India to meet with each other as freely as possible.

The present visa regimes must go. The Khokrapar and Ganda Singhwala border check-posts should be opened. More buses and trains should be allowed to run. Let newspapers cross the borders freely. These measures will immensely

strengthen both the governments to make the inevitable give-and-take inherent in any final settlement acceptable on both sides.

India and Pakistan should implement the accords already reached such as those of Siachen Glacier and Wuller Barrage. There was almost total agreement in 1989 on the draft of a no-war pact, — call it a non-aggression pact or a friendship treaty — which should be worked upon afresh. Then, there is the list of eight points agreed upon at Agra for further discussion.

No settlement is possible on the dispute of supreme importance unless consultation is started with the people of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir on both sides of the dividing line. The two governments should remove the restrictions on the movement of the people of Kashmir. They should be given passports to visit the other country. Above all, they should be allowed to cross the Line of Control near Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road.