

# Accelerate the Indo-Pak peace process

10.8.03 — The News.

One of the major characteristics of international relations is its dynamic nature. Things keep changing and to keep pace with the dynamic nature of international relations one has to be sufficiently abreast with tools that enable the maintenance of requisite pace. What one needs to realise is that not all developments are likely to have a positive impact, there may be some that could contribute towards further deterioration of the situation. This is particularly applicable to situation of delicate balance.

South Asia is a peculiar region in many ways. Not only it is an Indo-centric region but it has rarely experienced tension-free period since the partition of the British Indian empire. While India dominates the region in terms of its size, resources and geographic position, the atmosphere of the region is heavily influenced by nature of Indo-Pak relations. Since 1947 the area has not been able to emerge as an attractive peaceful region of the world.

While both India and Pakistan have expressed in no uncertain terms their desire to live in peace, the historical baggage and policy pursuits during the last 55 years did not facilitate peace and stability of the region. Lack of peace and stability took a very heavy toll in terms of human development. Not only one-fifth of humanity lives in the region but also a vast majority of people live in extremely appalling conditions. Despite being fully cognizant of massive poverty, overpopulation, diseases and less than satisfactory health infrastructure, the countries of the region continuously demonstrated lack of pragmatism and continued with their policy pursuits which were governed more by their national interests rather than regional considerations.

Undoubtedly there are many in the region that recognise the regional problems and would periodically even urge the countries to undertake con-

structive pursuits and advocate adherence to regional pragmatism. Regional pragmatism implies flexibility in foreign policies within the region, promotion of realistic pursuits and cooperative ventures, extending due consideration to other's sensitivities and subjecting the main regional disputes to concerted efforts with a view to finding a practical way out of disputes and entanglements.

At the declaratory level most regional leaders have repeatedly asserted their utmost desire to work for peace but at the practical level the efforts have been viewed with suspicion and cynicism. A regional pragmatist would be acutely conscious of the difference between the essential and the useful, the practical and the impractical, timely and untimely. He would indeed favour flexible policies that are in harmony with the existing incumbent conditions and avoid unnecessary rigidity. Lack of regional pragmatism has denied the area the desired peace and harmony for the last 55 years. While it is not difficult to enlist a large number of factors that are effectively impeding and slowing down the advent of regional peace and harmony, highlighting these factors is unlikely to provide the necessary boost to accelerate the peace process. Among the factors that tend to slow down the process are national interest, outsiders' involvement and the peculiar condition of the region, etc!

A list of such impediments can only tend to generate the impression that awareness about the obstructions exists. The essential question here is how to move forward without allowing these factors to take unacceptable toll.

National interest is undoubtedly the cardinal principle of international relations. Each country tends to promote, enhance and secure its national interests the way it deems best in the context of regional and global envi-



**Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema**

The writer works for Islamabad Policy Research Institute  
picheema@ipri-pak.org

ronment. If the efforts to promote national interest are blended with realism and legitimate considerations for other party's sensitivities, the outcome is likely to arrest the creeping negativism and help in the promotion of a healthy atmosphere.

The second factor that impedes regional pragmatism is the policy pursuits of the interested outsider. Each outsider comes to the region with its own agenda, which, in some cases, may clash with region's desire to unite. The history of the region is studded with innumerable examples of how the outsiders exploited the internal strife and cleavages to their own advantages. However they play a little part in creating the exploitable conditions. The outsiders can only come to the region if the insiders either invite them because of their domestic compulsions and regional pursuits or create exploitable situations.

The third factor that has slowed down the development of regional pragmatism is the peculiar nature of South Asia. South Asia is not only Indo-centric but also an asymmetric region. Among the seven states of the region, India is the largest in terms of population and resources. Besides, the tyranny of geography is manifested in such a way that while almost all the regional states have common borders with India, they do not enjoy physical proximity among themselves. This implies that the policies of India would inevitably affect all other neighbours. India seemed to have opted for aggressive policy pursuits than promoting the Gandhian principles of pacifism. This has further complicated the situation.

Each of the above mentioned fac-

tors facilitated the strengthening of the edifice of distrust. The idea of regionalism did not influence and attract the attention of policy makers all that much. Each one of us was more concerned with the security and stability of its own country — a very legitimate pursuit than being a full devotee of the desired regionalism. However, the growing realisation that a regional problem requires a regional approach is certainly providing requisite basis to opt for a more realistic pursuit, enabling the entire region to move ahead. To make a regional approach more effective, the countries of the region need to prepare for little compromises they may have to make in order to ensure the onward drive towards peace and stability.

Admittedly one major effort to promote regionalism is manifested in the formation of SAARC but the countries of the region are not satisfied with its performance. What one needs to realise is that SAARC can only function and pay the expected dividends once the regional countries opt for what has been referred as regional pragmatism. The regional countries in different fields for their collective benefits can undertake many pursuits but what is essential is to remove those irritants and disputes, which are continuously arresting the peace process. Let me only discuss one such area where immediate attention could be given in order to alleviate the situation prevailing in South Asia. This deals with the removal of human sufferings and miseries within the context of Indo-Pak relations.

Indeed the major source of human miseries in South Asia is the existence of widespread poverty. Poverty alleviation can best be achieved through regional approach. Already not only the awareness in this regard exist but some tangible work has also been done. The need of the time is to accelerate our collective efforts in order to make regional approach towards

poverty alleviation a success story. In addition to incumbent level of poverty, three other sources that are product of Indo-Pak tension are also contributing to the existing arsenal of miseries. All of these sources could be easily plugged. These include the sufferings of the Kashmiris, the miseries of the split families, and the plight of the fishermen.

Apart from the problem of poverty, which requires long-term collective efforts, all the other sources of miseries can be plugged provided the two countries make earnest, concerted efforts. It is my belief that even a dispute like the complex Kashmir dispute can be resolved to the satisfaction of both the Indians and Pakistanis provided they make concerted efforts. A sustained dialogue on the Kashmir dispute involving all the parties — the Indians, the Pakistanis and the Kashmiris — can produce an acceptable solution. As far as the split families are concerned special rules can be made to facilitate their regular contacts. The inadvertent drifting into other's territorial waters by local fishermen needs to be viewed sympathetically and efforts could be made to lessen the miseries the poor fishermen are subjected to.

It needs to be stressed in the end that the peace overtures made by the Indian Prime Minister on April 18th should be furthered. Having wasted so many initiatives and opportunities in the past, earnest efforts should be accelerated to make this one a success. The next five months are crucial to make substantive progress. A major blow to the existing edifice of distrust could be and should be struck during these months. After the passage of this crucial period, the electioneering favour is likely to grip most Indian leaders and it may become little difficult for them to undertake bold moves. Indeed the Indo-Pak normalisation process requires bold initiatives and pragmatic approaches from both sides.