

Defining the core issue

Dawn
19.8.03

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Pak. F. Feb. - June

LAST weekend Islamabad was hosting a group of nearly 60 parliamentarians from India. They represented all major political parties of that country — those in power as well as those in the opposition. Two factors would appear to lend considerable significance to this event. One, it came so close to the two nations celebrating their independence days.

The other factor, even more notable, is the fact that India's prime minister, usually a man of few words, took care to bless the meeting of the parliamentarians of the two countries with a special personal message, putting the stamp of his approval of this development. It also amounted to encouraging contacts between the two countries at what would amount to the highest political level and in a comprehensive fashion, associating the opposition parties with the process.

Observers would not have failed to notice that the president of the main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, too, made her contribution. She sent out a message of approval and support to the process, hopefully looking forward to opening the gates for interaction among all significant political elements on both sides.

From the Pakistan side the gesture received complete endorsement and support from President Pervez Musharraf downwards. In the seance at Islamabad all political parties took part and played the roles as one would expect of them. The atmosphere over this gathering of the top crust of the political life of the two countries throughout remained fraternal and cordial. Indeed, one saw virtually rivers of greetings and goodwill flowing. A really heart-warming spectacle it has been. As expected, the charismatic Mr Laloo Prasad drew the most of attention and applause as he declared he felt quite at home in Pakistan. His companions intoned.

Now that hand-shaking and embracing is over, it would be time to assess what are the gains from this event. First of all, let us remember, as former president and senior statesman Farooq Ahmad Leghari pointed out, this Islamabad experience was not the first of its kind. Of course, one would hope it is not the last. But so far such effusions of fra-

core problem is the Kashmir problem. All this is illusion.

As far as India is concerned, from day one, the problem has been Pakistan. To promote their personal and party political agenda, the leadership in India has ever since depicted Pakistan as the problem. Let us begin at the beginning. The Quaid-i-Azam had accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan that meant an India, independent and united. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had also accepted it. But, on second thoughts, he went back on it and, instead opted to put his signature on the Partition document.

Why Pandit Nehru behaved in the manner he did? He did not fancy the concept of sharing power. He wanted the whole of India, that is no Pakistan. As they then thought, it would not be possible for Pakistan to survive. Besides, it lay within the powers of post-August 14, 1947 New Delhi to scuttle Pakistan. This is not a very happy part of history to recall but brushing it under the carpet has given the people of this subcontinent all the heartaches over all these 56 years.

Only a few examples of how Pakistan was to be scuttled would do. Pakistan's application for the membership of the United Nations drew only one negative vote. That was Kabul's. Anyone could see the instigation behind that Afghan antic.

Within months of partition, water was cut off from three southern rivers of the Indus system. Vast areas of Pakistan, basically dependent on agriculture, went dry. That was terrible.

On its birth, Pakistan was a baby state that had almost nothing of the state apparatus that sustains a state. Not even a state treasury. At that moment Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru blocked the release of Pakistan's share of federal finances and the Sterling Balances. It was Mahatama Gandhi who noted what a ghastly misdeed it was. He had to go on protest fast to force New Delhi to render unto Pakistan what was Pakistan's.

In those early days, Pakistan railway system was coal-based. And coal used to come from the mines in distant eastern Indian state of Bihar. These coal supplies would be interrupted every now and then, throwing

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embracing is over, it would be time to assess what are the gains from this event. First of all, let us remember, as former president and senior statesman Farooq Ahmad Leghari pointed out, this Islamabad experience was not the first of its kind. Of course, one would hope it is not the last. But, so far, such effusions of fraternal sentiment have turned out to be some whiffs of passing cool breeze, only to be followed by the usual gusts of hot air.

There was a good deal of vague reference to the problems that undermine good relationship and result in frequent upheavals. How is one to forget that until only a few weeks ago, one million Indian troops were in forward, battle-ready positions on Pakistan's borders? From that belligerence to this welling up of fraternal sentiment is, no doubt most welcome, yet not so easy to understand. Trust may be too strong a word in this context.

The parliamentarians of both sides felt relief to note that the bus service between Pakistan and India has been restored. Officials on both sides are already pouring over plans to open the train and the civil aviation services. In other words, both sides are working to move in step towards normalization of relations. Not only that, the parliamentarians from India were talking in terms of brotherhood and fraternity. All of this is indeed sweet as honey. But it is something we have tasted before only to be followed by sour fare.

At least one noted Indian parliamentarian spoke about Kashmir. His words amounted to saying that Kashmir was recognized as a problem that needed to be addressed, as also so many other problems that inhibit Pakistan-India relations. This may, or may not be, of any enduring significance. Let us for a moment allow ourselves to be optimistic and see in this some advance. This may mean that, from now on, Kashmir will be on the agenda in some significant form, however subtle or indirect.

On both sides politicians talk of many problems that sour relations between Pakistan and India. It is here that both are under one grave illusion. All the problems they talk of — trade, commerce, travels, etc., — are the distortions emanating from the one and only one problem. We, too, on this side call that the

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Pakistan's railway system into chaos.

These are only a few glimpses. India is a huge country. Pakistan has no claims on it. But early in post-partition days, India persisted with its effort to guillotine Pakistan. Creation of the Kashmir problem was one of the very first tactics in the programme to undo Pakistan, if it ever came into being.

For Indian leaders from Pandit Nehru, who internationalized the Kashmir dispute, the problem is not Kashmir. It is Pakistan. Open-eyed observers would see what the Indian lobby is doing against Pakistan in the vast ocean of United States politics. The other day Pakistan embassy in Kabul was sacked. Not a repeat of the negative vote in the UN?

What the leadership in Pakistan today should insist New Delhi, regardless of what party is in power, is to demand a straightforward, unambiguous and sincere declaration that India does not resent and oppose Pakistan's existence and would henceforth cease to act against Pakistan without any provocation. Instead, India will close that chapter here and now and open a new page. India has nothing to fear from Pakistan. This country is in no position to cause any discomfort, let alone damage, to India. Number one: Pakistan cannot; Number two: it is not in Pakistan's interests to be on any terms with India, except the very best.

Two events in Islamabad

On last week's Sunday and Monday two significant events took place in Islamabad. One was a special Indo-Pak conference of Parliamentarians, senior journalists and "experts" that was convened by SAFMA (South Asian Free Media Association) that met on Sunday and Monday. The second was an officially-sponsored seminar on South Asia's security-related situation that was inaugurated by President Pervez Musharraf in which security experts — whatever that means — from the US, UK, EU, China, Japan and India met to define the South Asian problems and perhaps suggest ameliorating measures, if not solutions. This one met on Monday and Tuesday.

The first one, the Pakistan-India conference was concerned mainly with Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in order to facilitate the ongoing normalisation process that hopefully will open the door to stable peace and Pakistan-India friendship; it was a heavy weight affair. Over thirty MPs and over two dozen senior journalists and "experts" from India travelled to Pakistan via Wagha border checkpoint. This is an interesting precedent. It is nothing unusual for diplomats, Judges and Parliament (or Provincial Assembly) members to cross this land border; many of these categories do not even require visas.

But the fact that journalists and some experts were allowed to cross the border on foot is a new development. One supposes there just be either a one-off agreement between New Delhi and Islamabad to enable the conference to take place; or there is a new general understanding between them or agreement to allow other Indian and Pakistani citizens to cross the border on foot or even in a vehicle. One expects the government to clarify the situation whether this facility will be available to all journalists and experts in various fields.

The Indian delegation, particularly the Parliamentarians, represented quite a wide spectrum of Indian politics ranging from Congress, BJP, TDP, Mamta Banerji's representative, RJD and Samajwadi Party; both Communist parties and Revolutionary Socialist Party and a few other parties had sent their spokespersons. The Congress was represented by Margaret Alva, a distinguished politician. RJD delegation was led by the colourful Laloo Prasad Yadav himself. BJP's delegation was a strong one and it included Mr Ram Jethmalani, the Chairman of the (Indian) Kashmir Committee who incidentally had for company his two other Committee members: Dilip Padgaonkar and MJ Akbar. But these two gentlemen wore another hat: Chief Editorship of *Times of India* and *Asian Age* respectively. Familiar bigwigs of Indian press were there so were electronic media persons, notably Saeed Naqvi, the film maker.

Messages of goodwill and support were sent by Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, India's PM and Sonia Gandhi, the Congress President. Obviously, the Indians were according the Conference high significance and importance. Imtiaz Alam, the dynamic organiser, sought an equally representative assemblage of Pakistani Parliamentarians. MMA was represented by JUI chief Maulana Fazlur Rahman and other ulema; Q League sent Ch. Shujaat Hussain. Ex-President Farooq Leghari represented his Millat Party. PPP was represented by Mr. Amin Fahim and a string of other PPP leaders, notably Farhatullah Babar and Sherry Rahman. Pakistan government showed its goodwill by sending Ch. Amir Hussain, the



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PLAIN WORDS

Speaker of National Assembly, to inaugurate the Conference and Foreign Minister Kasuri attended the winding up session. PM Jamali gave a lunch to Indian delegates but in which Pakistani participants refused to take part.

The other seminar was inaugurated by the President. Authority thought more highly of it, as is evident by two facts: the President chose to address it personally and secondly the hotel where both functions were taking place had had to ask SAFMA Conference not to hold its session in the main hall (where it had met the first day); it was given to the official Seminar, partly perhaps because of the President's security considerations. But a signal was sent to the SAFMA participants about where they got off. Since one did not attend it, and except for the President's speech, little else has been reported about its deliberations, it is hard to make any significant comment on it. But the President's speech gave quite a few pointers.

The President's address amply showed how much he values peace and progress and how he will go on making efforts to overcome the various hurdles in the way. But along the way he trashed India's emphasis on bilateralism. Why? because dealing with India bilaterally was not easy as it is too disproportionately larger than all other members of the region put together. He sees India's size to be a huge hurdle, though most Indians are sure to retort that India cannot reduce its size for Pakistan's comfort and that other South Asians will have to take India as it is, huge and strong.

What was really significant was the President's reading of the international environment. It would be hard for most Indians to accept. Not even all Pakistanis will agree. He thinks that 9/11 and other factors like nuclearisation of India and Pakistan have shifted the Strategic Focus to the east. On that much hangs in his view. The question is how should we in South Asia react and re-adjust to the change? A subsequent question should be raised: whose focus has shifted to the east? Is he not referring to the sole superpower's focus and by east he means Afghanistan, Iraq and Central Asia and all of them directly bearing on South Asia? The third layer of this Shifted Focus in strategic matters is: which new challenges and opportunities face the people of South Asia.

Insofar as can be seen and inferred from Musharraf's emphasis it would seem that he was now moving away from the acceptance of India's insistence on bilateralism. He made a philosophical attack on bilateralism on Monday in the SAARC context for being a hindrance to the maintenance of peace by virtue of India destroying the balance of power (with Pakistan). He insisted on the retention of Pakistan's Nuclear Deterrent and strongly reaffirmed the belief that stable peace requires a balance in the powers of India and Pakistan. In the absence of any talk of even partial disarmament, it can only imply an upward spiral of arms acquisition, especially of Pakistan's capabilities. For, it is only Pakistan's lagging behind India's conven-

tional and even nuclear strength that has upset the balance of power. That India will react with increasing the differential is likely enough.

His emphasis on power balance can only be a signal of Pakistan's intention of redressing the imbalance. It is also a plea to today's mover and shaker, US, to sell more arms to Pakistan for correcting the balance. One is here not interested in the likely reaction of the US, which is not too hard to foresee. It is quite unlikely to sell modern hardware to Pakistan for fear of annoying India. But it can encourage some other arms supplier to pick up this necessarily smaller business. Anyway, the point is to note that Musharraf intends to redress the growing imbalance in military capabilities vis-à-vis India. That means another round of arms race with India.

Now, this is conceived mainly for the conventional strength. But his intent to keep the Nuclear Deterrent has also to be kept in focus. What does it imply? There are the usual caveats, to be sure, regarding this deterrent: it is to be minimal and no arms race is intended. But the Deterrent, in order to deter India, must have some nexus with India's stockpile of atomic weapons and vehicles to deliver them accurately and surely. It has to be credible in terms of the second strike capability. There is also a catch-all word much in use on both sides: it has to be kept updated. Look into the processes of updating. Are they any different than timely improvement in the weapons, including increasing their yield or numbers. Now, if India is seen to be going on vertically proliferating, as Pakistanis appear to do, at some stage the minimal number of bombs initially thought enough may have to be increased, especially from the viewpoint of a second strike capability.

Make no mistake: Keeping the Nuclear Deterrent — as a shield against 'just in case' use by India of its nuclear arsenal — also involves a nuclear arms race. Indeed, this nuclear arms race is already on. The new statement appears to mean an intensification of it. The same applies even more clearly regarding conventional arms balance correction. More of the same is on offer by President Musharraf — a clear hardening of his position as compared with the impression he was leaving in the second half of the year 2002. Perhaps, the small print even last year implied all this. But verbal emphases then were on pacific intentions. Now, these peaceful intentions have been redefined in a more conventional military style. If actions are more important than words, where the two governments headed will also require redefinition.

In sum, Pakistanis are being promised no let up in military build up, conventional and atomic. The state of the economy, it is claimed, is good, with IFIs smiling benignly and Monetary Reserves at \$ 11 plus. Some of us saw the situation to be suitable for the government to undertake heavier investment in infrastructure and production-promoting key projects. Now, President Musharraf has profitably exploited this strategic shift in the US Focus by aligning Pakistan with the US purposes. Thus we can somehow run the "necessary" arms races while the peace rhetoric will keep the US happy. Arms manufacturers will also stay happy and prosperous — though not the ordinary Pakistanis.

One wonders whose baby is the ongoing normalisation of ties with India, with indistinct and uncertain talk of possible Pakistan-India friendship?