

A pessimist does his duty

Civil societies of both India and Pakistan spoke loudly and clearly in Islamabad on August 10 and 11. They want an end to the sorry chapter of mistrust and conflict that describes the history of last 56 years. True, many are not onboard: they include the two concerned governments and even more importantly the civil and military establishments that write the agenda for the governments. These establishments are powerful vested interests that thrive on the cold war and arms races that the two countries have constantly been engaged.

These vested interests are not driven by political commitments. It needs to be investigated how the vast expenditures of unending arms race enrich the top layers of civil and military bureaucracy in Pakistan and top rank political leaders and bureaucracy in India, both civil and military. Ever attended a lavish dinner by an arms manufacturer's local representative and have you noted how the star of the evening was an important general. Among the invitees would be his friends and former colleagues, with more than a sprinkling of journalists who write on security matters. That is a minor facet of lobbying which in later stages graduates into private sessions where details are settled including who gets what with incidental differences.

Wide popular desire for peace and better relations, with more exchanges, is now well established on both sides; not point in overemphasising it. It should now be a given. There is however no sign that any government is actually moving in the direction of re forging the 'normal' ties. Pakistani authorities have managed to explain that by normalisation they mean the state of relations that obtained on Dec 12, 2001 - a day before the attack on Indian Parliament. There is no thought of going back any further. The Indian government seems to have accepted this willingly enough.

Look at the record of hard work the two bureaucracies have put in since April 18 last. Positive achievements are (a) reappointment of ambassadors; (b) some visas to each other; (c) release of imprisoned seamen on either side who should not have been jailed; (d) the resumption of Bus Service. Talks about air links are to begin 131 days after Vajpayee's initiative. Rail link between Lahore and Delhi is still not on the horizon despite the statements some months ago that both railway systems were ready to resume service. There is no mention of sea link between Karachi and Bombay or rail link between Sindh and Rajasthan which will help and facilitate a majority of inter state travellers. Mighty hard work, you would say.

The conclusion is obvious. Both governments are happy with things as they are. Their politics has flourished during the cultural and political standoff. And one is not talking of last 20 months alone. Military rule is so much the stronger and more entrenched by the military confrontation of 2002. Insofar as BJP Government is concerned, who does not know how it flourishes luxuriously on unfriendly references to Muslims and Pakistan. The party is well placed: it hopes to raise the Ram Mandir issue and hopes to win 2004 polls. There is perhaps some doubt about the incumbency factor. If the Vajpayee's, it is hoped, occasional Delphic pronouncements about making friends with Pakistan look like bearing fruit, there will be the statesman-like image of the next Prime Minister that will garner new votes. Indian establishment is in the happy position of not being pushed by the present situation and if it can gain anything on trade relations with Pakistan, it will be good too.

One does not know what drove Mr Vajpayee to make the second peace effort in April last.



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PLAIN WORDS

He is certainly an astute politician who has to win the general election next year. But he is also aging. He might well have a vision for his India in which reconciliation with Pakistan might play central role. No one should dismiss his initiative as being tactical or mainly election-related. One does not know him. One will, therefore, confine oneself to just one view that he is a wily politician trying to achieve his return to power. One does not deny there might be a genuine desire to befriend Pakistan for the greater glory of India. Nor should Pakistanis sneer: so long as his is not a clever-by-half scheme simply to get something from Pakistan

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without giving equal value, there should be no quarrel with how much greatness he wants for India. In partnership with Pakistan, India's greatness will add to former's own greatness. Let's keep our minds open regarding this possibility; as of now it is no more than a theoretical possibility. After all, Mr. Vajpayee's vision, if any, needs to be worked out, explained and sold first of all to the RSS *Parivar*.

More hard-nosed, if not cynical, explanation of the situation is that both Pakistan and India are horses that have been taken to the water but are not drinking it the way the third party expected — or perhaps it foresaw how they would behave. Both are going through the motions of trying to achieve normalisation, with obvious spiritual listlessness. At this rate, it will be hard for the two sides to manage the attendance of Mr. Vajpayee in Saarc's Islamabad summit. It would be odd if the rail and air links are still being discussed and modalities agreed while Mr. Vajpayee arrives in Islamabad on Jan 3rd and 4th. Not that he is likely to travel by rail or take a PIA or IA flight; government leaders have fleets of aircrafts to choose from.

It is to be conceded that speed of normalisation can scarcely be faster than what a particular government's core constituency will tolerate. But governments know a thing or two about manufacturing consent and consensus, if they so like. That's just the point: 'if they so like'. There is far too scanty evidence that Islamabad, or for that matter New Delhi, is anxious to take quick actions in pursuit of the limited normalisation of Dec 12, 2001. There is absolutely no thought of a genuine friendship

inside the governments; not many people in authority want to go beyond that limited normalisation. Their ideas about what is needed or should be desired does not include a people-to-people reconciliation with a view to revamping the budget-making priorities in both countries.

Insofar as Islamabad is concerned, it has all but returned to the core issue of Kashmir receiving more urgent attention, though other issues might be discussed simultaneously — as a concession. It is still Kashmir first and last. If it does not get any satisfaction on Kashmir, it will be happy not to make any progress on other issues, including trade if it can help it. This is a prescription to stay deadlocked with India all along the line. That does not worry Islamabad. But it should — and because of Kashmir itself.

One advances two major propositions: Kashmir cannot be wrested from India by military means. The second is Pakistan cannot always remain a garrison state, ready every minutes to fight. It is totally pointless. If Kashmir has no military solution, Pakistanis should turn their attention to other matters: trade, regional cooperation, education, especially of females, health and transferring funds from defence to civilian sectors. These things are objectives in themselves and not a means of improving the bargaining position. By behaving normally and achieving universal matriculation level education — vocational and technological — and attacking poverty frontally, Pakistan will not be obliging anyone but itself.

If Kashmir is not to be had by the war fighting readiness of Pakistan's armed forces, new thinking about how else can Pakistan make progress in the objective of enabling the Kashmiris to win their right of self determination. Ask whether little guns in the hands of Kashmiri youth have achieved anything? It suits India to terrorise most Kashmiris. Pakistan should cooperate with India in ending gunfires in Kashmir. Let politics be relied upon in a growing democratic ambiance in Pakistan, India and Kashmir. Let Pakistan allow India's liberals and human rights activists to strive for making the political rights of Kashmiris real. Whatever progress the Kashmiris make in asserting their human rights, it will have to be with the consent of the Indians.

If so, Pakistan's course should be aimed at genuine reconciliation and friendship with India with a view to (a) enabling Indian democracy to extend and be more than skin deep and (b) let's embark on a course of true democratisation at home and strip the Army of its political privileges. Let Kashmir's emancipation, as also of Pakistanis and disadvantaged Indians, be the common task of the peoples of India and Pakistan. Far more unites the Pakistanis with the Indians than divides them and let a free Kashmir be a bridge between them. Europe has shown that political boundaries and traditional sovereignties can be preserved while making the inter state friendship and cooperation as extensive and deep as possible.

One is here indicating an alternative line of thought. This is a course at 180 degrees to what Pakistanis have fruitlessly pursued; any futile insistence on no change in the course of action will be costly, the least of which will be continued backwardness and poverty of the masses. All alternative lines of thought point to better relations with neighbours, regional cooperation and less ardour in serving the sole superpower as an imperative, irrespective of where India may be going. If necessary a policy of peace and friendship can be imposed on India. But a lot of hurdles that litter this road to peace will have to be removed, some of which, like the nukes, are huge.