

Peace through understanding

Pak. P. relations - India
By Anwar Syed

Dawn
31.09.03

A YOUNG idealist worked for Lord Cromer, the British commissioner in Egypt, towards the close of the nineteenth century. Distraught by the intrigues and rivalries of European powers for influence in North Africa, he said to his boss one day that the powers might become friendly and cooperative if only they understood one another better. Leaning back, scepticism writ large on his face, Lord Cromer responded: "My dear boy, the better they understand one another, the more they will despise one another." Was he right? Yes and no.

Europe had been a field of slaughter for some three hundred years following the advent of the modern, centralized state not because the kings, who made the decisions of war and peace, did not understand each other. Barring an occasional misperception, they understood each other's ambitions for hegemony quite well.

While kings brought their armies to fight on the field of battle, their people across borders did not become enemies, or even estranged, until technology made warfare so expensive that governments could not fund their intended wars without substantial popular financial contribution which the people would not willingly make until they had been emotionally aroused to become actively involved as participants.

Conflicts of interest with others are not necessarily inherent in a nation's situation. They develop, more often, when its rulers begin to covet resources that belong to other nations. The most troublesome conflict between India and Pakistan has related to Kashmir. India conquered the larger part of it during its first war with Pakistan (1947-49), Pakistan wants it, but its attempts to take it by force of arms have failed.

The people of Kashmir have been in revolt against Indian occupation and rule for more than ten years. Suppressing this revolt has been a frustrating experience for Indian political and military leaders. The Kashmiri insurgents, on their part, are also showing signs of fatigue. All parties to the dispute may thus be having second, and more conciliatory, thoughts. Our own current position, as articulated by General Musharraf, is that a solution has to be found that is acceptable not only to Pakistan but also to India and the Kashmiris. It is then more likely than ever before that a modus vivendi between the parties can be found.

Other conflicts of interest between our two countries are considerably less substantial, existing more as trends than as ground realities. India's political and economic forays into the Middle East and Muslim Central Asia have been received in Pakistan as intrusions

While the starting premise in this reasoning may be correct, the conclusion is likely a misperception. Pakistan may be disrupted by its ruling elite's own neglect and recklessness, but it cannot be undone by India's military means.

The perception of threat from across the border is currently being discounted in certain quarters in both India and Pakistan. Professional people from the two countries have been getting together in "track two diplomacy" forums discussing issues, and talking peace for the last ten years or so. The frequency of these exchanges has risen dramatically during the last year or two. Delegations of parliamentarians (meaning politicians), businessmen, journalists, and peace activists have been exchanging visits. Doors to "peace through understanding" are being opened and the two governments are showing a certain amount of indulgence towards these initiatives.

Bus travel between Lahore and New Delhi has been restored with great fanfare. Indian

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visitors have gone back home vastly impressed with the lavish hospitality and friendliness the Pakistanis extended to them. Pakistanis returning from India have also been pleased with the warmth and graciousness with which they were received in that country.

Can this people-to-people diplomacy, this exercise in getting to know one another, remove "misunderstandings," erase long-standing mutual suspicions, and impart friendliness, at least good neighbourliness, to the relationship between our two countries? Possibly, but let us think more about it.

Some misunderstandings can be removed. We may begin to see that India is not bent upon breaking up our country and absorbing it. The Indians may find that we, Muslims, are not all extremist militants, and that each country has its share of such people. The impression on each side that the other's civilization and cultures belong to an inferior order may also be corrected as we see more of each other.

An Indian delegation, consisting of 59 persons, mostly legislators and journalists, recently visited Pakistan, bearing a message of "love and friendship." Its leader, Mr Laloo Yadav, and several of his colleagues stressed repeatedly that they and we were the same people. This is true to a degree, but it is also

and Hindus who despise not only Muslim individuals but hold Muslim civilization and cultures in contempt. Fortunately, persons of this hue are a minority in each country, but they form a very substantial and vocal minority in India.

Assuming that the militants can be held back, that the movement for promoting friendliness endures, and that the desired climate of opinion does emerge, can that climate have a compelling impact upon those who settle the issues of war and peace? The directive role of public opinion should not be exaggerated. As we all know, governments have a good deal of proficiency in the art of manipulating opinion. Their ability in this area increases enormously in times of crisis, and a crisis is never all that difficult to create. It follows that peace and cooperative relations between India and Pakistan will materialize only if both public opinion and the decision-making elites favour that goal.

Everybody wants peace if it can be had on his own terms. That is also true of the elites.

The more pertinent question then is whether they are willing to make concessions to the other side in order to achieve peace. Decision-makers relevant to our discussion here are the politicians in power, the diplomatic establishment, and the generals. Fighting is the generals' business. They and their men are paid to remain ready for war. They may not be itching to have a fight all the time; in fact, they may, on occasion, be quite reluctant to go to war if they fear they will lose it. But they cannot afford to sound and act like "peacemongers." If and when they

advise their political superiors against war as a policy option, they must do so quietly in secret parleys.

Diplomats are trained to have recourse to the "arts of peace" for the purpose of resolving conflicts. They offer an alternative to war as a way of ending an unacceptable situation in their country's transactions in international relations. Their business is negotiation. They take a back seat when a war is being waged. We may then assume that theirs is a voice for peace, except when war is clearly both winnable and profitable.

Assuming rationality on their part, one should be able to say that while politicians may not mind "nice little wars" that are fairly inexpensive and which their side is likely to win, they are reluctant to go to war if it is going to be costly and yet inconclusive. There can be no such thing as a "nice little war" between Pakistan and India. But the absence of war does not assure peace and friendliness. Decision makers may opt to live in high tension with a neighbour so long as they can stay away from the brink. This is what Pakistan and India have done.

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Other conflicts of interest between our two countries are considerably less substantial, existing more as trends than as ground realities. India's political and economic forays into the Middle East and Muslim Central Asia have been received in Pakistan as intrusions meant to diminish our present and future standing in these areas. This may be a misperception. India may be entering this area simply because it can supply things that the people concerned want more adequately and cheaply than, let us say, we can. We should not expect, much less call upon, our Muslim neighbours to choose between Pakistan and India, relate with one to the exclusion of the other. That approach will not work, for these fellow-Muslims will rebuff it.

Not all but many Indians have believed, and still do, that the two-nation theory and the resulting division of India were all wrong. This interpretation of history led many of us in Pakistan to conclude that the Indians intended eventually to right this "wrong."

Let the present drive for promoting mutual goodwill at the popular level in both Pakistan and India continue. It may generate excessive optimism that subsequent developments at the governmental level do not justify. But its potential for good is surely greater than any hazards it may carry. Moreover, do we have an alternative? If somebody has one, let him please tell us what it is.

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Elements of commonality between the two peoples, talk of their "sameness," should not be carried to the point of denying their distinct identities. That could be interpreted as a call for their political re-unification, that is, a call for the disbanding of Pakistan. (Kill us with love if guns won't work?) The need for caution in this regard cannot be over-emphasized, considering that balance and measure do not normally form part of the Indian or Pakistani disposition.

The goal of these comings and goings is to create a climate of opinion conducive to peace and amity. The proponents of this campaign will have to contend with opponents. There are fundamentalist militants on both sides: Muslims who have no use for Hindus,

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Ruling politicians may feel that the time has come to lower tensions, make mutual concessions to resolve outstanding disputes, and move towards cooperative relationships, but they may be kept from acting accordingly from the fear that their actions will not have the support of their relevant publics. It is precisely in situations like this that the peace activists, the makers of a pro-peace climate of opinion, have a role. The emergence of such a climate, if it becomes widespread, will encourage the politicians to start building bridges to peace, if they are already inclined to do so.

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