

Opinion

The Imperatives of Peace

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A news report in Dawn (24 December 1997) informs that Pakistan is reviewing its relations with South Asian countries. As part of this process, our (Pakistani) ambassadors to SAARC countries are meeting this weekend in Islamabad. The future of Pakistan's relations with India will undoubtedly dominate their discussions.

During the five decades since its founding, Pakistan's foreign policy has run on the single track of hostility with India, and the sense of anxiety, which issues from it. Nearly all our international relations, and some of the worst distortions in our political life have had their origins in the insecurities regarding India. Pakistan's cold war alliance with the United States was a function of the perceived Indian threat to Pakistan. From the early fifties onwards our defence planning, diplomacy, economy and political development were largely shaped by the dual forces of a perceived enmity and a presumed friendship. Institutions grew, vested interests developed, and a structure of belief took roots to support the perception of Indian hostility no less than the presumption of alliance with the United States.

Belief rarely allows for inquiry or critical analysis. This may explain the near-absence in Pakistan of research and analyses either on India or the United States. Americans have studied Pakistan; it takes a large shelf to fill their publications on this country. So have Indian scholars. Although their contribution has been comparatively less voluminous, Indians have done the best critical work on Pakistan-US relations. Ironically, in Pakistan negligible work has been done on either India or the United States. There is a paucity of Pakistani writings even on their policies toward Pakistan.

One explanation for this failure is of course Pakistan's barren academic environment. The other may be absence of demand. The educated establishment had held beliefs about both countries; it was secure in its knowledge or lack thereof. No institution or individual in Pakistan has conducted systematic inquiry of American history, culture, or politics. In Islamabad no one person engaged in policy making has ever asked me a question concerning developments in the United States. Similarly, outside of its small staff, hardly anyone employs the resources of the Institute of Regional Studies in Islamabad, the only serious research outfit in this country, which maintains by far the best documentation and clipping service on contemporary India.

I attended an afternoon session recently of a seminar organised by this Institute. The participants were senior former officials including ex-foreign secretaries, former Generals, and Air Marshal. To the best of my reckoning, only one participant-an MNA, who chairs an important security-related parliamentary Committee, had some connection to current policy making.

Although it was not the sole topic of discussion, India overwhelmed other countries—China, Iran, Central Asia, and other SAARC states—as the subject of the afternoon’s discussion.

There was a consensus that cold war’s end had closed the option of the US-Pakistan alliance which had permitted Islamabad to maintain a competitive posture against Delhi. Distrust of India ranged from moderate to deep. There was agreement that India seeks hegemony, and they expressed their frustration that it won’t negotiate on Kashmir which all described as the “core issue”, a generalised preference for peace and normal relations, and great confusion over how to reach that very desirable goal. The struggle for Kashmir was mentioned often but obliquely. There was to be a separate session on Kashmir, which I could not attend, and wondered what assessments, if any, were made of the ground realities and Pakistan’s contribution to the Kashmiri struggle.

A striking feature of the discussion on India was its normative and ambiguous texture. Several participants spoke of India’s hegemonious ambition but none defined the nature of hegemony it seeks, nor examined the domestic obstacles and regional or international difficulties it confronts in realising it. All spoke of the necessity to make peace with India- it is a question of ensuring the welfare of one and half billion people, said several speakers—but none identified the terms on which a settlement might be acceptable to Pakistan. All agreed that the core dispute to be settled was Kashmir, yet there was little indication of even the broad outlines of such a settlement, and none whatsoever of the strategy for such negotiations. I had an impression that if the elite of this select group were nominated to make policy and enter into negotiations with India they will conduct diplomacy with consummate skill and follow their brief deploying well honed instincts rather than a well through out strategic design.

Or perhaps their reluctance to discuss matters substantively and make concrete recommendations reflected the logic of caution in a national security environment rife with pitfalls and uncertainties. The cold war’s end has rendered out of date the diplomatic and military equations of the previous half-century. In an environment that demands fresh estimations of future challenges, Pakistan lacks a coherent and authoritative apparatus for formulating foreign policy; domestic political and ideological interests have become operationally enmeshed in security related matters. There exists an element of invisibility in shaping and executing policy especially in such crucial areas as Afghanistan and Kashmir, and demands of conformity to established beliefs and shibboleths discourages the few who dare challenge the officials and semi-official orthodoxy. Yet to avoid plain talk is to court failure in national security.

A diplomacy of détente with India has been variously declared by our highest officials, including the Prime Minister, as an objective of Pakistan’s foreign policy. There are compelling reasons, old and new, in its favour. While political divisions have existed during its millennial history, the South Asian subcontinent has been marked by continuous patterns of unity in diversity. The continuities of South Asian economic, cultural, and social life have been broken not so much by the partition of 1947 but by the hostile Indo-Pakistan relations, which followed it. Nature, history, and the requirements of political economy suggest the necessity of softening the frontiers of commercial and cultural exchanges between India and Pakistan.

Contemporary realities have vastly augmented the compulsions of nature and history. The economies of nation-states are being inexorably globalised, and both India and Pakistan have

formally signed on to this process with such international compacts as WTO. If we do not control the pace and nature of transnationalisation, external forces will certainly do so. Moreover, as the world economy is dominated by advanced capitalist countries, they set the terms of exchange to their benefit and to the detriment of less developed economies.

The less developed countries, as such, need to improve their bargaining power and protect their interest in international trade and regulatory agencies and agreements, a challenge they can meet only by improving economic and technical exchange in each region, and by evolving collective policies and stands. It is these imperatives that underlie the formation of regional organisations like ASEAN. Unfortunately for South Asian countries, SAARC has not been able to take teeth mainly because two of its primary members —Pakistan and India —remain stuck in an adversarial posture.

India and Pakistan now possess nuclear weapons, or at least the capability to weaponise swiftly. This development has changed the logic of their adversarial relations in ways to which policy makers in both countries have failed to adapt adequately. India and Pakistan are in fact nuclear powers without a nuclear doctrine. Neither is known to have developed a system of command and control. From what is known, neither country has the early warning, fail safe, and hot line systems, which are essential to ensuring that deterrence would work reasonably well. At the same time, the political logic of deterrence is at work. As the United States and Soviet Union did during the cold war, India and Pakistan are fully engaged, under the umbrella of deterrence, in covert warfare. It has already reached a level that rarely a bomb goes off in Delhi or Bombay without the Indian government blaming ISI, or a terrorist killing occurs in Karachi or Lahore without Pakistan accusing RAW. This phenomenon renders South Asia an extremely unstable nuclear environment.

The imperatives of peace between the two countries are compelling. But the obstacle to it is no less lofty. Kashmir is the core issue. Pakistan cannot yield on it. India is equally determined to keep its control over the disputed land. On what basis then can Pakistan improve relations with India? The answer requires an honest appraisal of the current Kashmiri environment, the struggle and outlook of its people, and Pakistan's options there. PTV broadcasts are a poor guide to reality.

The Kashmiri uprising in 1989 offered Pakistan a fresh opportunity to enliven the question of Kashmir and move India toward a settlement. This opportunity has by now been dissipated. Since 1994 ground realities have been shifting in India's favour. Although it has not won Kashmiri hearts and mind, it can sustain its presence there for a decade. Nearly all informed observers estimate that not more than 2,500 Indian soldiers have been killed in eight years. Its material costs are not more than 7.8% of India's military budget annually. Most observers, including those sympathetic to the Kashmiri struggle, estimate India's losses against the Northeastern insurgency to be higher.

On the other hand, Kashmiris have suffered enormously, both from Indian repression and economically. Their pool of Mujahideen manpower has all but dried up so that an overwhelming majority of fighters are the "guest militants". Divisions within Kashmiri ranks are such that nearly all leaders of the Hurriyat Conference are guarded by India's security forces even as they travel and speak against India. Change in their attitudes, subtle and not-so-subtle, is discernible. Even Ghulam Butt, leader of the Jamaat-i-Islami recently dissociated from armed militancy and

announced that his party will concentrate on political struggle, a stance Pakistan will do well to support.

Given these realities and also the imperatives of normal relations with India, Pakistan's only viable choice is to delink Kashmir from other aspects of Indo-Pakistan relations. An understanding regulating arms control and nuclear deterrence, mutually beneficial agreements and openness on trade and co-production, increase in cultural and educational exchange and travel need not be kept hostage to the unresolved dispute over Kashmir. Rather, disputed Kashmir can participate in this process of normalisation while maintaining and insisting on its right to self-determination. Only a policy of seeking antagonistic collaboration with India appears at this point in time to be viable option for Pakistan.

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