

India-Pakistan Peace Initiative: Some Reflections

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In the backdrop of goodwill and euphoria generated in South Asia through several Confidence Building Measures (CBM'S) and peace initiatives over the last more than a year culminating in Indo-Pak bilateral Secretary level talks, the recent developments in region indicate that road to peace is rather jagged. The first challenge to peace initiatives was posed by firing in civil areas in Kargil (Ladakh region) in Jammu and Kashmir state from across the line of actual control in Pakistan. It was followed by sudden and mysterious reports appearing in some sections of Press in US that India was planning to deploy the Prithvi missile about 100 kilometres away from International border with Pakistan. It was strongly denied by India and even Indian Prime Minister issued a statement denouncing the report as baseless. In the latest turn of events, Pakistan test fired the Missile acquired from China under a new name Hatf-III. The Missile is capable of carrying nuclear weapons and targeting major Indian cities. This development which has grave strategic and defence implications for India, evoked a sharp response from the Indian Prime Minister. He declared that India's nuclear options were open and that the Agni missile programme had not been shelved. In the meantime, the sudden militant violence in Punjab, which according to Indian Prime Minister, was being supported by Pakistan, is bound to vitiate the atmosphere of peace so assiduously initiated and built by Mr. I. K. Gujral himself. He had to admit that such incidents placed a strain on the process of bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan. In this background, it is relevant to analyse the peace initiatives, which were undertaken during the last more than a year and identify the bottlenecks stifling the peace process in both the countries.

The bilateral dialogue to settle outstanding issues between India and Pakistan initiated by Indian Prime Minister Mr. I.K. Gujral in pursuance with what is now generally described as 'Gujral doctrine' was acclaimed widely as a new peace initiative in South Asia. The Indian Prime Minister made it clear that India wanted to give preferential treatment to her neighbours in South Asia. In this vein, several agreements were finalised with Bangladesh and Nepal and long term demands of these countries were accommodated by India leading to Indo-Bangladesh Water Treaty and agreement with Nepal to provide Transit facilities to that country. All these measures were adopted with the objective of transforming the region into an area of peace. Indo-Pak dialogue forms a party of the initiatives undertaken by India to forge a new understanding among the SAARC countries.

Indo-Pak relations remained mired for a pretty long time and both the countries clashed three times militarily without resolving any issue. In the changing global scenario, Pakistan responded favourably to Indian offer of improving bilateral trade and commercial links between the two countries. India even bestowed 'Most Favoured Nation' (MFN) status on Pakistan. It is in this background of goodwill that Pakistan Prime Minister responded positively to Indian Prime Minister's initiative of holding bilateral negotiations on all outstanding issues including Kashmir.

In the recently concluded Foreign Secretary level talks held in Islamabad in June, 1997, a major breakthrough was achieved in identifying the core issues as well as forming the working groups to propose mechanisms to deal with these issues. In the joint statement issued at the conclusion of talks, the 'outstanding issues of concern to both sides' were identified as: Peace and Security (Including confidence building measures), Kashmir, Siachen, Wullar Barrage, Sir Creek, Terrorism and Drug Trafficking, economic and commercial cooperation and promotion of friendly exchanges. This development was followed by other measures, viz., setting up the hotlines by the two Prime Ministers, the release of prisoners and fishermen and revival of communication links between the Formation Commanders on both sides of the border between India and Pakistan. All these initiatives are processes in confidence building measures, which were perceived to gradually ease tensions between the two beleaguered neighbouring states. It is equally noteworthy that both the countries have agreed to take all possible steps to prevent hostile propaganda and provocative actions against each other.

The new phase in Indo-Pak relations received wide acclaim from the people in both the countries. There could have been no better timing for initiating the peace dialogue than the current year when both the countries are celebrating the fiftieth year of their independence. It is ironical that the two countries having a shared common history of thousands of years, common languages and cultural patterns and norms should be trapped in the quagmire of confrontation against each other.

The Vested Interest

As the peace initiatives are paying rich dividends for the people in both the countries and a new constructive approach is being adopted to deal with the contentious issues, there is a visible unrest in certain quarters in Pakistan. The developments, which ran parallel with the peace initiatives but contrary to its spirit, indicate that peace process in South Asia is upsetting the apple cart of vested interest within Pakistan and outside it. Therefore, the attempts are being made to create an atmosphere of confusion in which the peace initiatives may get obfuscated. There are external forces too whose strategic interests remain secure in the interlocking of India-Pakistan conflictual relations. Their role may not be visible to the naked eye but several developments do indicate the nexus between the internal and external forces converging on the agenda of keeping the stalemate in Indo-Pak relations going.

Pakistan Prime Minister has shown enough courage in standing up to defend the new bilateral initiative with India. However, he faces formidable challenge from Army, bureaucracy and right wing political parties. The army's perception was articulated by Chief of Army Staff who issued a provocative statement last year when first round of talks were taking place between the two countries. He said that Siachin would not be demilitarised. These observations came in the wake of Mr. Nawaz Sharief's assertion that he had people's mandate to improve relations with India. The right wing approach was articulated by the daily Nawai-Waqt in its editorial on 26th June 1997. The editorial underlined that there was no change in India's stand on Kashmir and concluded: "There is still time to come out of the misplaced optimism with regard to relations with India. We must face reality and abandon the childish desire of developing economic links with our neighbour (India). We have to introspect and decide whether it is in our national interest to continue the policy aimed at cultivating cordial relations with India at all costs. The nation's

response is in negative. The rulers should also act according to the sentiments of the people and inform India that until it abandons its stubbornness, no bilateral talks can take place.”

In the latest turn of events, as reported in media, Pakistan was making serious efforts to tip its missiles with nuclear warheads and was building a missile factory with the assistance of China at Fatehjung, about 50 kilometres south-west of Islamabad. According to Press Trust of India, Pakistan could be in possession of more than 80 M-11 missiles with a range of 300 kilometres and a payload carrying capacity of 800 kilograms. According to the report, China is said to have trained Pakistani personnel in assembling and use of the M-11 missiles.

The Pakistan press has further reported that Pakistan was likely to oppose India in her efforts in assuming permanent membership of the Security Council. It may be mentioned that UN General Assembly session in September will approve a US proposal for five more permanent Security Council seats, three of them for the developing world. This move is aimed at broadening the representation of the developing World in the western dominated Security Council.

In the background of these developments, there is equally a growing opinion in India responding to these collateral developments in Pakistan. It is being argued by some sections that India was conceding too much without receiving the desired response. Mr. Gujral’s latest statement on India’s nuclear options may be seen in this very context.

Pakistan Prime Minister, Mr. Nawaz Sharief is faced with a formidable challenge within his own country. He is trying to introduce systemic changes within the political system to be in tune with the modern developing democratic societies. He is asserting that he has people’s mandate, apart from the international compulsions, to introduce the changes. The normalisation of relations with India will provide a conducive atmosphere for him to bring in the desired changes in that country. It seems that the vested interest, keen to maintain the status quo, is not abdicating its traditional role in keeping the Indo-Pak relations under strain.

These developments indicate that road to peace is a thorny one and it would require determination, perseverance and courage to tread on this path. However, the repeated assertions of both, Mr. I. K. Gujral and Mr. Nawaz Sharief, that the dialogue would continue and peace initiatives would move at their own pace, give rise to the optimism that the dream of ushering South Asia into a zone of peace would be realized, the impediments from vested interests notwithstanding.