

Search for an Indo-Pak Detente

(Mahbub ul Haq)

The prospects for a meaningful dialogue on detente between Pakistan and India seem to have brightened in recent weeks. There are some powerful reasons to take advantage of these opportunities in a cool, dispassionate, statesmanlike manner.

First, the human costs of the current arms race between Pakistan and India are becoming prohibitive. Both countries presently spend \$ 13 billion a year on defence in domestic prices (over twice that much in international prices). India ranks no.142 in the world in real per capita income (in Purchasing Power Parity dollars) according to the World Bank estimates but no.1 in arms imports according to the data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Pakistan does marginally better : no.119 in real per capita income and no.10 in arms imports. Both countries now purchase twice as many arms from the global arms bazar every year as Saudi Arabia which is 25 times richer. Both countries possess 6 times more soldiers than doctors when their people are dying of ordinary diseases. In fact, India and Pakistan now belong to an exclusive international club with the ten largest armies in the world, India placed at no.4 position and Pakistan at no.8. The social costs of this military spending are enormous. India and Pakistan have the lowest literacy levels in the world -- lower than many African nations -- and lack most basic social services of primary health care, safe drinking water and adequate nutrition. Human lives are shriveling as more arms accumulate. Ranking in the UNDP's Human Development Index this year (134 for Pakistan and 135 for India) should oblige policy makers in both these countries to hang their heads in shame.

Several factors make this arms race even more dangerous and more unacceptable today. Global military spending has been cut down by an average of 6% a year since the end of the cold war in 1987 but military spending has kept increasing by nearly 2% a year in real terms (PPP dollars) in India and Pakistan during this period. Globally, the standing armies have been reduced by 16% since 1987 but the size of these armies has further increased by 8% in India and Pakistan, to a total strength of over 2 million soldiers today. Both countries are now entering a new phase of acquiring many costly weapons, including submarines, jet fighters and missiles. In fact, there is a real danger of a new missile race in the sub-continent which can be prohibitively expensive for both countries. Add to this the dangerous potential of nuclear weapons, information about which is still shrouded in secrecy, and it becomes abundantly clear why both countries should seek an end to their perpetual confrontation and a more meaningful dialogue for mutual detente.

Second, another good reason to seek a detente at this stage is the change in leadership in India. Prime Minister of India, Deve Gowda, while heading a fragile coalition, comes from the deep South where the popular sentiment does not run so strong about Kashmir. India's new Foreign Minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, is a remarkable statesman, a pragmatic politician, who feels quite deeply about engineering a peaceful

settlement between India and Pakistan. Long a personal friend, I had the pleasure of listening to his views in the informal Indo-Pakistan dialogue, organised under the auspices of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, in New Delhi in February this year and was greatly impressed, along with other participants, by his remarkably candid and refreshing proposals on how to settle current Indo-Pak disputes. I believe that he is a person we can do business with and we must seize this opportunity. Moreover, I formed an impression from the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation dialogue that India is also become increasingly conscious of the enormous cost that it is suffering -- not only the financial cost but cost in terms of international prestige, status and role -- for subjugating the Kashmiri people and that India is willing to explore pragmatic solutions to this long-standing dispute.

Third, a new element in the picture is the mediating role that the United States is trying to carve out for itself. Some analysts view this development with great suspicion, accusing the U. S. of all sorts of exterior designs. What is important for Pakistan, however, is to review calmly how such mediation can serve our own national interests. U.S. motives may be many and varied. In geopolitical terms, U.S. may be seeking to create a counterweight in South Asia to China's growing political and economic presence in the world. It may also be worried about the dangerous implications of nuclear weapons in the hands of two desperately poor nations where any emotional outburst or miscalculation can lead to such disastrous consequences that they will make the international community forget what happened in Somalias and Burundis. The U.S. could well be motivated by larger humanitarian considerations or by some extremely narrow national interests. Such speculation is largely irrelevant. What is relevant is to make an intelligent and skillful use of America's good offices in Pakistan's own national self-interest.

Fourth, the desire for peace is strong among people on both sides of the border. People are seeking real liberation from their current wretched state of poverty and human deprivation. The informatics revolution is bringing to their doorsteps progress achieved by other countries. They are witnessing the triumph of the forces of peace over historical hatred in many parts of the world -- from Palestine to South Africa. They are waiting for basic social services rather than for gleaming modern weapons. They long for clean drinking water rather than for submarines or jet fighters. In fact, it is a good question what the response of the people would be if they were offered a free choice in a national referendum whether they would feel more secure with the proposed purchase of arms or with the alternative supply of basic social services. It is quite clear that governments in India and Pakistan lag far behind the aspirations of their own people for peace and development. It is for this reason that civil society may have to put enormous pressure on their governments -- by organising advocacy groups, by using the increasingly powerful media channels, by carefully selecting priority issues on which initial success can generate considerable momentum for further change. It should be recognised that many powerful interest groups will oppose such a dialogue on detente -- quite willing and ready to assassinate the character and credentials of those who advocate the politics of accommodation between the two countries. But people of goodwill have no other option but to sail against the prevailing winds.

As such, there are powerful reasons for initiating a new dialogue for detente between Pakistan and India. But we must also design a new strategy for such a dialogue since the traditional pattern will not work.

First, we must recognise that a dialogue on such stubborn issues as have divided Pakistan and India is a process over time, not a one-shot operation. It requires great patience, skill, perseverance and tactical flexibility. We cannot, and should not, declare success or failure after a few high-level meetings. We must use time as an ally as has happened in many other disputes. For instance, China agreed in 1982 to accept a pragmatic, step by step transfer of Hong Kong in 1997 over a period of 15 years during which it was left under the "trusteeship" of Britain. Panama and the United States agreed in 1979 that Panama Canal will be transferred back to Panama's control but only in 1999, after a "trusteeship" under the U. S. for another 20 years. The passage of time has often calmed down inflamed emotions and made many solutions acceptable which looked difficult otherwise.

Second, there must be some give and take in the process of negotiations. Inflexibility can only be a prescription for failure. Fundamental objectives can stay constant. However, negotiating strategies must be adapted to changing realities. This is particularly true of the long-standing dispute on Kashmir where the present impasse must be broken through some fresh approaches.

I suggested a few months back a new approach to the Kashmir dispute which drew a good deal of excited comment in the country and many undeserved personal attacks. I still believe that these proposals are worth very serious consideration. Let me recapitulate the six main components in my plan :

- (i) Both India and Pakistan should withdraw their forces out of Kashmir towards a defined border belt as an initial step towards complete demilitarisation of Kashmir.
- (ii) The present border demarcated by the Line of Control between the two parts of Kashmir should be completely opened to enable Kashmiris to live together in peace.
- (iii) The political and economic administration should be transferred to the full control of the Kashmiri people through a programme of self-governance in a step-by-step process.
- (iv) For a period of next ten years, Kashmir be placed under the administration or "trusteeship" of the United Nations to ensure that current passions cool down, the present violations of human rights cease and the Kashmiri people get a real chance for determining their own fate at the end of this process.

- (v) Kashmiri leaders should be allowed to get together freely and discuss among themselves the form and shape of the future of Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan should tacitly accept not to "bilateralise" the Kashmir issue but to leave it increasingly for discussion among Kashmiri leaders.
- (vi) After a temporary period of UN trusteeship, a plebiscite should be held under the supervision of the United Nations to determine the free will of the Kashmiri people -- whether they desire accession with Pakistan or with India or to remain independent.

There is much in this plan that will dissatisfy both Pakistan and India. But the precise components of any such proposal are not important at this stage. What is important is a fresh approach to unfreeze the Kashmir issue, to end the bloodshed in India-occupied Kashmir, to give a chance to the Kashmiri leaders to explore new approaches for an eventual solution, and to find more acceptable ways to restore the right of self-determination to the Kashmiri people. For this purpose, tactical flexibility is absolutely necessary while refusing a compromise on essential principles. Long-time crusaders like Nelson Mandela and Yasir Arafat had to accept many tactical compromises recently, however unpleasant and unpalatable it must have been politically.

Third, while all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan need to be included in any comprehensive package of negotiations, it would be quite counterproductive to make progress on any one of the issues a hostage to a simultaneous progress on all the issues. It is true that Kashmir is a central component in any such negotiating package so far as Pakistan is concerned. On that, there is no difference. But there are two schools of thought on how negotiations should proceed after the negotiating package has been placed on the table. One school contends that no deal should be accepted on any other issue (whether more open trade, easing of travel restrictions, or exchange of technical cooperation) unless the Kashmir issue is settled first. The other school argues that the history of negotiations in other parts of the world shows that simultaneous progress on all issues is never achieved and the heart of any successful negotiating strategy is to consolidate progress on a few issues which are easier to settle and then to build up momentum on other issues as well, never forgetting the core issue but using progress on many side issues as building a favourable environment for the core issue.

It is in this spirit that I am in favour of resumption of open, non-discriminatory trade between Pakistan and India. Denial of normal trade is only helping the smugglers (smuggling of \$ 1.5 billion is estimated at present), not the consumers (who do not get cheaper prices) nor the government (which does not receive the custom revenue). It is the duty of a civilised government to patronise its consumers, not the smugglers. I favour immediate open trade between Pakistan and India for the simple reason that it would benefit Pakistan -- in providing cheaper imports, in opening up a larger market for Pakistani exports, in encouraging beneficial competition between the two countries, in opening up several avenues for joint enterprises in association with foreign private investment as well. When regional trading blocs are being formed all over the world, it is

the height of folly for Pakistan and India not to open their vast markets to each other while opening them up to the rest of the world. Of course, Pakistan should protect those industries which need such protection so long as such policy is non-discriminatory. At the same time, India must liberalise its import policy for consumer goods which is very restrictive at present. These are matters for detailed negotiations. But not to make progress on trade till all other issues are settled first is a short-sighted and unrealistic strategy. Nor does it behove Pakistan to be afraid of trade competition with India when it can stand competition with such powerful industrial giants as Japan, Germany and United States and when it competes with India in any case in the third markets. The sooner we get rid of our inferiority complex and national neurosis on this issue, the better it would be in our own national self-interest.

There are many other issues on which progress can be made while the core issue of Kashmir is still under discussion. There is much scope for technical cooperation between Pakistan and India. If India has succeeded in doubling the yield per acre in Indian Punjab compared to Pakisani Punjab since partition, while the two Punjabs had similar yields at the time of Independence, it will not hurt Pakistan to learn something from this experience instead of sending its agricultural experts all over the world to study irrelevant country experiences. Nor would it hurt India to study more closely the participatory development movements in Pakistan like the Aga Khan Rural Support Project or the Orangi Project run by Akhtar Hameed Khan. France and Germany sent exchange students to each other's country for a long time after the Second World War to overcome the long history of hostility between the two countries. Similarly, it may be possible to reach an understanding on the Siachin Glacier dispute or on nuclear safeguards or on travel and cultural exchanges.

It is sometimes suggested that political leverage can be maintained on one's opponent only by denying normal avenues of economic cooperation. This line of reasoning underlies the position of those who argue that there should be no trade with India without settlement of the Kashmir issue first. To be candid, this is a reasoning based on very feeble grounds. Normally, political leverage increases when there is normal trade and commerce. Look at the experience of the sole remaining superpower, the United States. When it has delinked economic and political issues -- as in China where it has renewed MFN (Most Favoured Nation clause) every year despite differences on China's record of human rights -- it has been able to engage China into a constructive dialogue and maintain its policy leverage. When it has imposed trade embargoes -- as in the case of Cuba since 1959 -- this has only proved counterproductive and many analysts have argued that such an embargo has only prolonged President Castro's hold over power. Without an economic engagement, political influence often becomes limited or non-existent. Nor can core issues be settled if there is a determination not even to discuss any other issue. Of course, there is a delicate balance in any negotiating strategy : how to make progress where it is feasible and yet to keep the attention focused on the core issue. This requires diplomatic skill, not unthinking obduracy.

Fourth, the modalities for a new dialogue between Pakistan and India may have to be very different than in the past if any success is to be achieved. Foreign Secretary - level talks are often a mere formality and an exercise in futility. These Foreign Secretaries from both sides, exceptionally able as they are, have very little room to maneuver in these negotiations. Moreover, their talks are generally held in the full glare of media attention where verdicts are fairly swift about their instant failure. Nor are bilateral summits likely to be very productive since leaders from both sides are heading fragile coalition governments and are unlikely to feel strong enough to make any courageous moves for detente. This is where the role of third - party mediation comes in and where the United States' new interest in brokering a deal with India and Pakistan should be intelligently exploited. One way would be for Benazir Bhutto and Deve Gowda to appoint special envoys with an extensive mandate to negotiate in a small group which includes a special envoy of President Clinton as well. Some preliminary talks should be held in a secluded environment before an agenda is prepared for a high level summit that also includes U. S. President as a mediator. Both sides should keep their opposition parties fully informed about these quiet negotiations so that a bipartisan consensus can be created.

No one can predict today the future direction of Pakistan - India relations. For too long, both countries have been locked in a bitter confrontation with each other. This has seriously mortgaged their development potential. It has greatly frustrated the aspiration of their people for a better life. It has also disappointed their friends abroad.

Has the time finally arrived to bury deep this bitter legacy of the past and to cultivate a new harvest of hope? I firmly believe that there is a tide in the affairs of nations, as in the affairs of men, which "taken at the flood leads on to fortune". There are times in the lives of a nation when its inner soul stirs as it has never stirred before, when its people speak up with one voice, when its destiny beckons. Are we at such an historic moment in the lives of these two nations? No one can say for sure. But we can all try, in our own modest way, to seize the moment and to make it historic.

After all, human destiny is a choice, not a chance.

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