India-Pakistan: The Pangs of Peace

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War is easier to make than peace. Anyone can start a war. Peace, on the other hand, takes at least two to make and almost everyone to keep. We have, therefore, made more wars than peace. And since we still have not learnt the art of war very well (remember TE Lawrence!), it is no surprise that we are not terribly good at making peace. That is no excuse for giving up. Churchill once famously said: "The Americans would ultimately do the right thing, but before that, they must exhaust all other options". The US may be no role model for making peace, but most of us do no better. Ideally, a country should employ all its elements of national power, force too if necessary, to create a favourable position to negotiate peace. In practice, we embark on the peace path only when all other efforts have been stalemated, in fact, checkmated.

India and Pakistan needed fifty years before they were ready to 'do the right thing'. Europe, cited today as the citadel of peace, took longer. During this period, the two countries developed internal strength, sought external support, acquired unconventional capabilities, used sub-conventional means, even fought wars and made some half-baked efforts to peacefully resolve their conflicts. Finally in 1997, in the belief that they were now well positioned to make amends, both India and Pakistan decided to work-out a framework to build durable peace.

Evolution of the Concept

The task was entrusted to the two Foreign Secretaries, Salman Haider of India and Shamshad Ahmed of Pakistan. Their first challenge must have been to create the right conditions to start a dialogue on Kashmir, the bone of contention between

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the two countries right from their inception. It had now acquired such complex dimensions that no meaningful discourse on the subject looked possible. In Pakistan, securing the right of self-determination for the people of Jammu and Kashmir is one of the national objectives. It is, therefore, very difficult for any Pakistani leadership to embark upon a structured dialogue with India that was not seen to be addressing Kashmir, seriously, if not urgently. India, on the other hand, having declared the disputed state as its integral part, could not be seen negotiating its status, not seriously at least. The foreign secretaries' meeting of June 1997 found an ingenuous method to circumvent the dilemma.

Their recipe, now popularly known as the "composite dialogue", was to form a number of working groups, eight in all, to discuss important bilateral issues more or less concurrently. Peace, security and Kashmir were to be dealt with at the level of the foreign secretaries. Relevant ministries or departments could address the rest like trade, terrorism, drugs and some territorial disputes. Pakistan could now claim that its "core issue" would be handled at a high level. And the Indians could take consolation from the fact that the foreign secretaries were unlikely to meet very frequently, and whenever they did, there would always be matters of concern to India — cross-border infiltration, for example. With the contentious issues segregated by type as well as by degree of their complexity, in theory the dialogue could now begin, perhaps even show quick results since some of the problems would be easy to resolve. But a clause in the joint statement had the potential of becoming a serious impediment.

Pakistanis have generally, and understandably, believed that in a dialogue process, while the Indian interests — like greater economic cooperation — could be addressed in quick time, talks on Kashmir, due to the complexity of the issue, would make little headway. There was, and still is, a fairly broad based belief in Pakistan that if the Kashmir question was not settled before improving other neighbourly ties with India, the latter would no longer be interested in resolving it. To address these apprehensions, Clause 4.2 of the joint communiqué stipulated that all issues were to be discussed in an "integrated" manner. It meant that the progress on all issues had to be in tandem. Sounded fine; but for a problem. If there were little or no movement on one issue, one would have to slow down on all the others. The "favourable environment" needed to deal with the more complex problems would thus become contingent on progress in all areas. This was exactly the catch 22 situation that the authors of the dialogue formula had set out to avoid. The "integrated" part was, therefore, quietly dropped (but not from the official text). The process was now more like moving with our disputes on

parallel tracks and getting them out of the way as and when feasible. No longer "composite", the dialogue retained the politically correct adjective. What we now had was, in fact, a "multiple-track, multiple-speed" formula.

Evolution of this concept was purely a civilian sector enterprise. All the same, since it is the military that prides itself in the study and development of strategic wisdom, it may be gratifying to note that a military strategist too would have approved the plan. When operating along multiple axes, forces that meet less resistance continue their momentum. That helps operations on other fronts as well. In due course, some critical fronts can be reinforced to achieve a breakthrough and capture the main objective: in this case, durable peace in the subcontinent.

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The Learning Phase

Good concepts, brilliant designs, even sound strategies, have never been enough. For their success, we make certain assumptions and lay down conditions that must be fulfilled. It must be assumed, for example, that an agreement, no matter how favourable to one or the other side, is not to be touted as a one-sided victory. Eager to make political capital out of the accord, the Pakistani government went to town for having made the Indians "finally" agree to discuss Kashmir. The Indians reacted predictably, and "clarified" that the only aspect of Kashmir that they ever intended to discuss was Pakistan's support to the insurgency in Indian held Kashmir. The composite dialogue, and along with it the peace process, were put on ice.

The following year, 1998, the arch-rivals brought their nuclear bombs out of the basement. The celebrations that followed in India and Pakistan, and not only on the streets, were accompanied by plenty of chest beating and bellicosity towards each other. Obviously, there were also concerns, both inside and outside the region: how the two nascent nuclear powers would adjust to the new, potentially dangerous, nuclear environment. At the very least, some measures were needed to prevent either side from triggering nuclear weapons in panic, or because it misread a situation — when the other side tested a missile, for example. Nuclearisation had indeed provided the two countries another chance to review their chronically tense relationship.

In February 1999, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Indian prime minster, undertook a landmark bus *yatra* to Lahore. The Lahore Declaration that he signed on February 21 with his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, went beyond nuclear confidence-buiding measures (CBMs) and attempted to revive the peace process. The "composite dialogue" once again formed the bedrock of the agreement. And once again, it was shelved before it got a fair chance.

It is not clear if India was first to violate the spirit of Lahore when it failed to notify a routine missile test carried out soon after Vajpayee's return to Delhi. But the agreement was most certainly dead when, in early May, Pakistani backed militia was found occupying the Kargil heights in Kashmir on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC). It was withdrawn after two months of intense fighting and bilateral as well as multilateral haggling. Pakistan was held entirely responsible for the breach. Its defence that it was only preempting another Indian incursion (an earlier, in 1988, had resulted in India occupying the Siachen Glacier) found no takers. Indo-Pak relations suffered another setback when in October 1999, the Pakistani Army Chief, Gen Pervez Musharraf, took power in a military putsch. The Indians believed that the general was the architect of the Kargil misadventure, and were unwilling to resume the peace process as long as he was in power. But when Musharraf was found firmly in the saddle, Vajpayee invited him to give "peace another chance". Musharraf, who had in the meantime assumed the office of president, visited India in July 2001 and met Vajpayee in what became known as the Agra Summit. No agreement was reached this time around.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the events took a further dip. When America decided to invade Afghanistan to flush out Al Qaida, the group suspected of this enormity, it sought allies in the region. Pakistan was one of the countries asked. India argued that Pakistan was "part of the problem", and, therefore, ill suited to be a partner in the so-called 'war on terror'. It offered its own services instead. Pakistan got the role as it was better placed. Already sulking for being upstaged by Pakistan, India mobilised for war when members of a banned Pakistani militant group attacked its Parliament. For most of 2002, the armed forces of the two countries remained in a state of high alert. There were, however, good reasons that this tension did not escalate into war, even a limited one.

Some of the reasons are well known: the risk of nuclear conflagration; and, because of that, third parties primed to restrain the two sides before they went over the brink. Another, perhaps the more potent constraint, is less known. An all-out conventional war between the two countries was very likely to end in a strategic impasse. Since countries do not normally start wars without a reasonable chance

of achieving a major objective, during the last three decades, India and Pakistan have not taken their conflicts beyond build-up on borders and skirmishes across the LoC. India could still have initiated a war during 2002, either in frustration, or in the belief that the US presence in the area would deny Pakistan its nuclear option. However, there were some other restraining factors as well. War would have removed all constraints on Pakistan to support the insurgency in Kashmir, which could then become more intense and durable. More importantly, if the war did end without causing major damage to Pakistan, it would have deprived India of a potent card that it had so far used to good effect: the threat of war.

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Even though Pakistan has a reasonable chance to prevent India from achieving a decisive military victory, it is still sensitive to Indian war threats. Being much smaller, its economy is more vulnerable to war-like tensions. After thirty years of high economic growth, it had experienced its worst recession during the 1990s. Now that some recovery looked possible, significantly as an important ally of the US, tensions with India were an unwelcome development. Paradoxically, when the drums of war receded, both countries found that their threat cards were now, under the law of the diminishing returns, running out of steam.

Indeed, Pakistan too had time and again threatened that if India did not agree to settle the Kashmir problem, the region could blow up in a nuclear holocaust. In the absence of any desperate resolve to back-up these threats, this card was fast losing its effectiveness. I believe, in 2002, India's threat of a conventional war had also run its course. Now that the two countries had manoeuvred each other into a deadlock, it was time to revive their on-again off-again peace process. The 2004 South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Islamabad seemed to be the right moment. Before that, the stumbling blocks that had caused the failure at Agra had to be removed.

The very fact that the framework evolved in 1997 had survived the nuclear tests, the Kargil episode, a military coup, 9/11 and the stand-off of 2002, indicates that it was a robust construct. The secret of its durability is its inbuilt flexibility. We

may recall how its founding fathers used ingenuity to accommodate some very serious concerns from both quarters. In Agra, this capacity was not employed and the two sides insisted that their respective interests be recognised as "*the*" core issue: Kashmir for Pakistan; and the cross-border infiltration for India. To resolve this conflict in the spirit of the original concept, all one had to do was to make both concerns part of the process.

Two extracts from the joint press statement of January 6, 2004, after Prime Minister Vajpayee had met Gen Musharraf to seal the agreement, show how smoothly it could be done.

> President Musharraf reassured Prime Minister Vajpayee that he would not permit territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism in any manner.
>
> The two leaders are confident that the resumption of composite dialogue will lead to peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu & Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides.

Launching of the Process

The plan was now perfect, but to give the process, a good start some movement on the ground — for example, with a round of meetings, even if these were on mundane issues— was one good idea. Some quarters, however, believed that an initiative on Kashmir, even a symbolic one, might be the best way to kick-start the process. Kashmir after all was not only the "core issue" for Pakistan; having sucked in hundreds of thousands of troops, it was also a "multi-corps" problem for India.

The gesture had to meet some essential criteria: it should be without prejudice to the declared Kashmir policy of India and Pakistan; it had to provide some hope that a resolution of the dispute was seriously sought; and it would sufficiently engage the Kashmiris to let the two countries work on their less intractable issues. A meeting of the leadership on both sides of the Kashmir divide seemed to meet these criteria adequately. Ultimately, it was decided to start a bus service between the two parts of Kashmir from April 7, 2005. The idea must have been that not only the leaders, but also the divided families could be brought together. The bus was also bound to make a bigger and better all-round impact than meetings of a few individuals — who, in any case, were not expected to show immediate results. There was, however, a risk involved: if an odd bus was blown up by any of the many detractors of the peace process, at that nascent stage, it would have suffered a serious setback. That mercifully did not happen, nor did much else after the initial

euphoria over the bus trips and some high profile visits by the Hurryiat leaders to Pakistan. The symbolism was still helpful.

The subsequent period has been, and continues to be, rough going for Pakistan. Internally, the country has gone through a very lively transition from a military led rule to an elected government. The latter has so far fallen far short of the minimum expectations of a civil society that is now very vocal and vibrant. The fallout from the foreign occupation of Afghanistan has seriously affected the security situation domestically as well as on the western borders. The quiet eastern front, till its calm was broken by the November 2008 Mumbai blasts, was ,therefore, a welcome reprieve. India, too, must have been relieved by the post Kashmir bus developments. It found time to stabilise, as best as it could, its part of Kashmir and start work on its water resources that in other times would have created quite a rumpus in Pakistan. It was badly shaken by the Ram Mandir episode but has possibly recovered. Post Mumbai, however, there may well be a need to review the peace process and in case it was revived, how to manage it a little better.

Concluding Thoughts

The design logic of the peace process was rightly based on resolving contentious issues at a deliberate pace; essentially slow, but considering our poor track record and cautious bureaucratic culture, quite realistic. The problem is that neither our peoples nor the political leaders are known for the patience needed to keep faith in a process that did not show tangible results on a regular basis. For a while, it was possible to keep them in good humour with brave pronouncements and cultural exchanges, but soon they were demanding increased economic and trade benefits that the process did not deliver.

And, indeed, there was always the threat of subversion, not only by the militants who would find periods of no progress ripe for their activity, but also from any other quarter, external or internal, not in favour of an Indo-Pak rapprochement. Even though some very heroic statements were once made in the two capitals that acts of terror could not derail the process, and there were reasons to believe that both countries understood that the handle over peace should not be yielded to its detractors, some well planned and well timed acts of sabotage could seriously set the whole process back. Mumbai is proof, if one was needed.

Kashmir can also be counted upon as an issue needing constant care. Though deftly handled for a while, it has the potential to erupt if its people are not taken on board. Even if the two sides abide by the spirit of the “composite

dialogue", there are bound to be problems. Pakistanis, for example, could become impatient because the "favourable environment", that was supposed to help resolve the issue, was taking too long. Indians, on the other hand, might start getting nervous if the Muslim majority from their part of Kashmir found greater affinity with their co-religionists in Pakistan. Some of us were, therefore, feeling uncomfortable when Musharraf was making proposals in quick succession to find the "final solution" for Kashmir. The Indian non-response may have been for any number of reasons, but in keeping with the logic of conflict resolution, such suggestions were counter-productive. The other side would understandably suspect that the idea was more beneficial to the initiator. The resolution of the conflict, was therefore, best left to the evolution of the process — till the improved atmosphere provided enough confidence to all the stakeholders to accept that what they had to forego was worth its while.

Conduct of a peace process is too complex an affair to be left to any organ of the state. Bureaucrats are required to take care of the technical aspects of an issue. When they are stuck, the political bosses have to take decisions to break the logjam, and very often, exercise leadership to garner public support. Occasionally, however, it may be politics that would become the stumbling block. After Mumbai, for example, any Indian government with an election looming in its face would have had a hard time not yielding to public sentiment. Who all may have helped to limit the damage, I do not know, but at times like these, some sane minds working behind the scenes could be of great help.

Therefore, we can always be well served by unconventional wisdom, not only to pause when necessary or breakthrough when stuck, but also to discover fresh grounds to cooperate. There was, for example, not a single "establishment" voice from either side that supported "joint investigation" after the Mumbai carnage. Some even recommended dismantling the "joint anti-terror mechanism". Anyone tasked to keep the peace process on track would, in fact, have seen these two instruments as CBMs. That reminds me: the Indus Water Treaty, the longest running CBM between the two countries, is also in need of some resuscitation.

And, just imagine, if someone were to come up with an idea, how the two countries could work together to help Afghanistan in this hour of great distress! Unless some Indians thought it was a Pakistani ploy to lure them in the Afghan quagmire, or the Pakistanis saw it leading to their "encirclement" by India, it might become the first regional initiative to get the foreign forces out of our area. A monkey taking all the cheese from quibbling cats, I believe is a South Asian fable.