

A New Detente between Pakistan and India

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For the last 50 years, India and Pakistan have stared across the border at each other with naked hostility. The situation looks increasingly hopeless. But it is always the darkest before dawn. The current tensions should not discourage new efforts.

There is now a window of opportunity to move from constant confrontation to mutual accommodation. This is for several reasons :

- We live in a period of rapid change where the forces of peace are triumphing over the forces of confrontation - from Palestine to South Africa.
- The economic costs of confrontation are becoming prohibitively high for both India and Pakistan.
- A new post-independence generation is emerging which does not carry the bitter memories of the past.
- International pressures for peace are gathering momentum as cold war is over, global military expenditures have declined by one-fourth since 1987, and a new phase of economic and financial globalization is overtaking the world.

It is quite clear that the time has come to openly debate the rising economic cost of confrontation between India and Pakistan. Both countries are spending around \$ 20 billion a year on defence, in international prices. Despite their crushing poverty, both countries are buying twice as many arms from the global arms bazar as Saudi Arabia which is 25 times richer. Both countries have six times more soldiers than doctors, even though their citizens are dying of ordinary diseases. Modern arms are being procured when human lives are shrivelling.

It is sometimes argued that such expenditure is essential for national security. But this is totally wrong. How can national security be guaranteed when weapons accumulate but people starve; when military generals move in air-conditioned jeeps but nation's children are stifled in windowless school rooms; when military expenditures rise and social expenditures fall? We have recently witnessed the economic and social disintegration of Russia : despite having enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world ten times over, it could not feed its people or provide them with productive jobs and decent social services. And we have seen that 15 years ago, in 1980, military to social spending ratio was the highest in Iraq (8 times), Somalia (5 times) and Nicaragua (3.5 times) and all three countries could not protect their national security or their national sovereignty or their

people. On the other hand, Costa Rica spent nothing on its military, having abolished the army in 1948, and spent one-third of its national income on education, nutrition and health : it is the only prosperous democracy in a troubled Central America. Today, the concept of security is linked with the enrichment of human lives, not with the mindless acquisition of modern weapons.

The situation is particularly grave in India and Pakistan. When the entire world has been reducing military spending since 1987, at an average rate of 4% a year, only two regions have actually been increasing their military spending : South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. It seems to be the privilege of the poor countries to spend their scarce resources on arms rather than on their people. By now, India and Pakistan contain one fifth of the world's population but one half of the world's poor. South Asia has already fallen behind Sub-Saharan Africa in adult literacy, 47% vs. 55%. In fact, South Asia's literacy rate is now the lowest of any region in the world. In South Asia, 800 million people lack elementary sanitation, 280 million have no access to safe drinking water and 380 million people are illiterate, two-third of them women. South Asia is simply not ready to enter the 21st century which will demand high-quality human capital in an era of intense global competition.

It is time for India and Pakistan to withdraw from this abyss and to turn to the real issues of human development. Their mutual detente can also create a better environment for reaching a settlement of many other disputes within South Asia, from Farrakah Barrage in Bangladesh to tapping the potential for power generation in Nepal. It is in this spirit that a five-point agenda may be considered.

First, let SAARC agree on a 5% a year mutual cut in military spending and earmarking these resources for the education and health of their people. An agreed and simultaneous cut in defence spending should be managed in a fashion that it does not compromise the national security of any one of the SAARC countries. Such a plan of action will provide basic social services to all people in South Asia within a decade : in fact, the time period may become shorter as the international community is likely to match such an exciting investment in peaceful development.

Second, full trade can be resumed under the umbrella of SAPTA (South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement). Instead of smuggling of around \$ 1.5 billion between India and Pakistan, which benefits neither government revenues nor consumers, it is best to open up normal trade on a non-discriminatory basis. It is the responsibility of the government to shield the consumers, not the smugglers. Of course, Pakistan should protect those industries which need such protection so long as such a policy is non-discriminatory. At the same time, India must liberalise its import policy for consumer goods : it makes no sense to ban even the import of tooth pastes or razor blades from neighbouring countries. Without regional cooperation and competition, the SAARC nations are likely to lose out in the expanding global trade markets.

Third, there is much scope for technical cooperation within the region. There is so much they can learn from each other in successful policies and projects, in grass roots movements, in new and effective agricultural technology, in credit schemes for small farmers and small enterprises, and in many other fields. For example, in Pakistan we should try to find out why agricultural yields per acre in Pakistani Punjab are now about one half of the yields in Indian Punjab when they were about the same at the time of partition. We can also learn how Bangladesh provides credit to its poor peasant women through the Grameen Bank. Or how India's Bangalore has become the second largest exporter of software over the last decade. Other countries can learn from our experience in the Aga Khan Rural Support Project or the Korangi Project or the Edhi Trust. The South Asian countries should suggest to the UN to give their development assistance for training in each other's country rather than irrelevant training courses in far off places.

Fourth, it is obvious that progress on many of the above issues will become possible only if there is some movement on the settlement of outstanding political disputes. This is not easy but some way can be found if there is the necessary political will and constructive pressures for change from the civil society. For example :

- Why spend \$ 1 million a day, contesting the frozen heights of Siachin Glacier? Why not redeploy the troops? Why not withdraw them a few miles away from the glaciers, pitch tents in an open field, keep arguing around a negotiating table, while saving precious financial resources of Rs.10 billion a year (and human lives) and investing these resources in education and training? Indeed, an agreement was almost reached in 1992 on this issue.
- Why not accept a UN trusteeship for the next 10-15 years over both India-held and Pakistan-held Kashmir? Why not withdraw armed forces completely from inside Kashmir to near a border belt, withdraw all administrative machinery, open the border between the two parts of Kashmir, and give the Kashmiris themselves a chance for self-governance and peaceful development? Why keep bilateralising the issue between India and Pakistan when the real affected party are the Kashmiris who must be given a free hand to decide for themselves? The only chance for a hopeful development in Kashmir is to take one step at a time, to unfreeze the issue, and to accept Kashmiris as the most important party in the dispute and to give them an opportunity to resolve it according to their own wishes.
- Why not bring in foreign mediation on issues like the Wuller Barrage (and later on, Farrakah Barrage and other issues) on the successful pattern of Indus Basin settlement?

Fifth, it is in the interest of both India and Pakistan to find a new understanding on the nuclear issue rather than embarrass each other in international forums. It is time to lift the nuclear curtain. Pakistan and India should find a common cause in asking for a full membership of world's nuclear club which has now actually seven members, not just five. Both countries can then readily accept both the rights and the obligations that go with such membership, including the signing of Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and advocacy of NPT. Both countries should also reach a mutual agreement to ensure that there is no possibility for a nuclear confrontation or nuclear accident or a first-use of nuclear weapons - in other words, a bilateral NPT agreement.

I presented all these proposals in an informal Indo-Pakistan dialogue organised by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation in New Delhi on 5 - 6 February and there was a surprising degree of consensus on several issues.

It is quite clear that these proposals demand too much rationality and statemanship from the existing political systems. It is for this reason that civil society must take the lead : it must organise advocacy groups, use the increasingly powerful media channels, carefully select priority issues on which initial success can generate considerable momentum for further change. The last decade has been a decade of the people who have led the process of change all over the world, whether in East Europe or in South Africa.

The choices are quite stark today. Either India and Pakistan can bury deep the bitter legacy of the past and cultivate a new harvest of hope. Or they can both begin to disintegrate in a vast swamp of human despair. The choice is theirs.

What is needed most today is political and intellectual courage to discuss these issues openly and candidly. It is time to sail against the prevailing winds. Our generation has no other choice. We may all fail. But we can never forgive ourselves for not even trying.

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