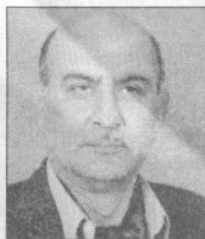


Prospects of peace

VIEW



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THE CONGRESS PARTY'S return to power in India was heralded by most Indian analysts with the assertion that there would be no change in the prospects of pursuing a peace initiative in the region, particularly with Pakistan. Sonia Gandhi, the party chief, reassured the world and Pakistan of the same intent, as did Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the foreign minister.

The peace talks began, but it appears that that is all they are destined to do. The chances of success do not appear to be bright; in fact some say that they seem bleak. Despite rhetorical claims from both sides, neither India nor Pakistan, has exhibited the flexibility needed for a breakthrough.

Pakistan has not dropped its insistence on the centrality of the Kashmir dispute. In fact it is now asking for a timetable for progress on Kashmir before awarding India the most favoured nation (MFN) trade status. India cannot agree with Pakistan on a definition of terrorism. It was left un-stated but appears to be obvious that the disagreement is a result of the Indian desire to define terrorism in a way that would justify referring to any cross-LOC support to the freedom fighters in Kashmir as such. Where do we go from here?

Theories of conflict resolution abound with alternatives, but the two approaches being disputed here are sometimes referred to as "the domino approach" and "the centripetal approach". In the former, as in a game of dominoes, the central domino is tackled first, resulting in the fall of all other dominoes. This is the approach Pakistan desires to adopt. The centripetal approach recommends, in the event of the central issue being too complicated, to tackle peripheral issues first, thus creating a centripetal force, which would become inexorable and necessitate the resolution of the issue.

I don't think anybody in India or Pakistan seriously disputes that the real issue is Kashmir. The question is only of how to tackle it. While the domino approach might be best, if it could be employed, there is no disputing the fact that Kashmir issue is, not only complicated, but also a highly sensitive matter on both sides of the border. I, therefore, vote in favour of the centripetal approach. While continuing to talk about Kashmir, resolve other issues, creating an environment where any solution of the Kashmir issue might become acceptable to both, since its non-resolution might have unacceptable consequences.

It is also my view that demanding a timetable for the resolution of Kashmir issue is unfair. On the other hand,

I also think that India's insistence on a definition of terrorism that includes cross-LOC support to the freedom struggle stems from a desire to deny that it is indeed indigenous. It is refusing to accept the many political errors by many Indian governments that gave rise to an indigenous movement, which was covertly supported by Pakistan and perhaps continues to receive support from private individuals and organisations that the government of Pakistan ignores. Neither of these efforts smile favourably on the hope of moving towards peace.

There is little doubt in my mind that the Kashmir issue will be resolved in due course. The solution is unlikely to be in accordance with Pakistani aspirations, or even with the original Kashmiri aspirations. The world is changing all the time; we all have moved a long way since 1989 and a lot of water has flowed under the bridges even if we ignore the tidal wave of Kargil. It would be in the interests of all concerned to delay the unpalatable until one has acquired a taste for it. It is unwise also to seek a decision from a position of weakness.

This, in fact is the real issue on both sides; a refusal to face the truth. India refuses to accept that Kashmir started as an indigenous problem and the support it received could not have mattered if it was unwelcome. This, despite the example of the 1965 adventure, when an effort by Pakistan to spark a freedom struggle was clearly unsuccessful. Pakistan, on the other hand refuses to budge from its position of "providing only moral and material support" to the struggle and refuses to accept its weakness emerging from this claim and Kargil. But public admissions are unnecessary for progress. Even a tacit acceptance of the truth can help both move forward. Trading accusations, too, is unnecessary. Walking the path of peace does not entail negotiations via the media.

The atmosphere could not be more conducive. There is a tangible desire and hope for peace among the people on both sides. I believe that there is a similar desire even in both the governments. They are, however, finding it difficult to move away from their stated positions. There is a whiff of hope that pressure on both countries from the international community can help. Even when one sees signs of gloom, one can hope.

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