

INDIA and Pakistan no longer talk to each other. The foreign secretaries no longer meet for talks. One after another the carefully nurtured channels for talks between the defence secretaries and the home secretaries have all become choked. Diplomatic ties are shrinking to mere tokenism. It is jingoistic war hysteria which passes for dialogue. The cost of this Indo-Pakistan no-war no-peace deadlock has been an insidious militarisation of Indian foreign policy and society as a whole. A war hysteria bursts out at every confrontation.

Pakistan's intelligence agency, ISI, was blamed for masterminding the burning down of the most sacred of Sufi shrines in Kashmir, Charar-e-Sharif. An outraged Rajesh Pilot, the junior home minister, went on the BBC World TV Service and threatened war against Pakistan to settle the "unfinished" business of Partition, that is the liberation of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. In the midst of cries for war by ministers in the Rao cabinet, it was not the voice of the Ministry of External Affairs which was heard, but the Indian army chief who said that Pakistan and India were locked in an "undeclared war" in Kashmir.

When soldiers take over the work of diplomats we are coming too close to the Clausewitzian dictum, war is diplomacy by other means.

So caught up have India and Pakistan been in the unraveling of diplomatic channels in the mindless pursuit of a tit for tat policy, that the two countries are in danger of no longer knowing how to talk to each other.

"What difference will it make if the diplomatic links collapse and the embassies are shut down? As long as the hot line between the Director Generals of Military Operations is intact, what else do you need?" A liberal-turned-cynic asserted. But that

Politics of Confrontation

Breakdown in Indo-Pak Relations

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is exactly what is to be guarded against most - reducing the Indo-Pakistan dialogue to soldiers talking to soldiers. The hot line between the DGMOs of India and Pakistan was designed as a part of a system of checks to prevent escalation of tension, a confidence building measure to complement the existing network of diplomatic channels, not as a substitute.

Rising military expenditure in the subcontinent and the arms arsenal are but the overt manifestations of the militarisation of Indian foreign policy. The UNDP Human Development Report, 1994, states that Pakistan and India together account for 18 percent of world arms imports, twice as much as Saudi Arabia. For the years 1988 to 1992, India ranks as the number one arms importer. What the high level of military expenditure means in terms of funds diverted from areas of public health and education can be seen from the figures given in the table:

| Percentage of GNP | | Pakistan | India |
|-------------------|------|----------|-------|
| Military Exp | 1960 | 5.5 | 2.1 |
| | 1990 | 7.3 | 3.1 |
| Education | 1960 | 1.1 | 2.4 |
| | 1990 | 2.6 | 3.1 |
| Health | 1960 | 0.3 | 0.5 |
| | 1990 | 0.2 | 1.0 |

**numbers in thousands
Source: Ruth Sivard, World Military and Social Expenditures 1993.*

But even more subversive is the way the Indo-Pakistan relationship has got boxed into a blind national security frame to be managed by the intelligence agencies and the security specialists.

At a time when the hurling of jingoistic war cries across the border has stirred a war hysteria, the first lesson of diplomacy, that you never stop talking, seems to have been forgotten. It's a lesson that General Zia ul Haq, a practitioner of the game of brinkmanship, never forgot, claims I. A. Rahman, a columnist and president of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission. Writing in the *Frontier Post*, Rahman urges the need to keep open diplomatic and people-to-people channels of communication. "This logic was accepted even during the 1965 and 1971 wars and also when Zia was cultivating every Indian he could lay his hands on while Operation Brasstacks was in the air," Rahman adds.

Instead, one by one, the institutional channels of communication are being carelessly cast aside. What remains of the carefully nurtured structure of bi-annual meetings between the foreign secretaries, the home secretaries and the defence secretaries? In fact, the decks had been cleared in these meetings for the signing of an agreement on Sir Creek and Siachin, bringing to an end the senseless stand-off in the highest battle-field in the



Protest during the Zia regime against discriminatory Islamic laws

world which costs India Rs one crore a day. But the Kashmir factor has derailed talks on all other fronts. The defence secretaries have not met since September, 1991.

The bilateral dialogue has been virtually suspended since January, 1994 when the then Foreign Secretary J. N. Dixit went to Islamabad. There was a flutter about “non papers” around which could be steered a fresh round of Indo-Pakistan talks. But the course set is for “non talks”. There is the hiccup of proposed talks every now and then, set to the frequency of listeners in the U.S. and Europe, but as in the case of Pakistan’s latest proposal, the preconditions doom it to failure. That is, India must repeal TADA and get its human rights record in order.

Even diplomatic links run the risk of being reduced to tokenism. Consulates in Karachi and Bombay have been closed down. Staff strength in the two High Commissions has been slashed. To talk of who struck first is knit-picking when the two countries

are embattled in a “tit for tat” politics of confrontation. Moreover, the brutal assaults on diplomats and embassy staff in both India and Pakistan have made a mockery of the code of conduct agreed to between the two countries. And when all they do is face intimidating harassment at the hands of the “thugs” of the spy agencies, it does beg the question of what use it is to keep a substantial diplomatic presence in each other’s countries.

It is a fact that harassment by intelligence agencies has severely shrunk the functioning of the diplomatic missions. But there is another nagging question that dogs the retreat of the legitimate functions of the *Corps Diplomatique* (CD) — what are the implications of India and Pakistan surrendering the CD functions of embassies to become mere listening posts for spies and that too inefficient listening posts as the agents are heavily shadowed?

Journalists have also been on the hit list. Recently in effect, exit orders were served on three Indian journal-

ists based in Islamabad. In a rare show of restraint, India did not get trapped into a reprisal cycle. With restrictions of exchange of newspapers, periodicals and books, the squeeze on journalists will choke the flow of information between these countries even further. The loss would have been even greater if the journalists in most cases did not see themselves as an adjunct of their embassies. Constraints on their movements and access to people reinforces this tendency to work in tandem with the embassies and view “news” from a national security perspective.

So an event such as hundreds of people coming together in Lahore to form a human chain for peace and tolerance, is not news in India. Yet on December 20, a peace rally was organised by the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, the Joint Action Committee for People’s Rights. Industrial workers, lawyers, students and political workers stood silently for 90 minutes to appeal for peace and sanity. They carried banners like,

“Save Karachi”, “Save Pakistan”, “Dialogue, only Solution”, “Stop Sectarianism”, “Unite against Violence” and “No to military solution”.

Why should it be that Indians visiting Pakistan, whether it be the BJP’s K. R. Malkani or the former cabinet secretary Nirmal Mukarji, both, are surprised at confronting the pluralist nature of discussion in Pakistan? Take the nuclear issue, it has become part of the accepted litany of the subcontinent, that whatever the sacrifice, Pakistanis will not give up the bomb. From Zulfikar Bhutto’s assertion that Pakistanis “will eat grass” to the current Foreign Minister Assef Ali’s assurance of not bartering away its nuclear programme for the U.S. F-16 aircraft, there is to be no rollback.

In the midst of this it seems hard to believe that in Pakistan in public forums, there is criticism on issues of militarisation and denuclearisation. In February and March 1994, *The News* group of publications had organised two seminars in Karachi on the nuclear issue. Media attention had been hijacked at the time by the ex-army chief General Aslam Beg’s disclosure about the discussion in government circles about command and control of (Pakistan’s) nuclear weapons. But also at the seminar was Akhtar Ali, by profession a management consultant, by conviction the author of *Pakistan’s Nuclear Dilemma*. Ali argued that at present there was a stable symmetry between India and Pakistan in nuclear development. It was the ideal opportunity for Pakistan

to get maximum political advantage at the negotiating table before India outstrips it technologically. Ali felt there was no need to tangle with the issue of whether Pakistan should or should not go in for a nuclear deterrent. It is a question that Pervez Hoodbhoy, assistant professor for physics in Quaid-e-Azam University,

State Strobe Talbot on his mission to “cap” the programme.

Babar’s media missive was political. But that there is a community of people in Pakistan who are concerned about militarisation and nuclearisation was evident when the Pakistan chapter of the International Physicians against War organised a seminar in Karachi on weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, even at the risk of being labelled pro-Indian, on April 22, lawyers, physicians, journalists, trade unionists and academics joined a SAARC peace initiative floated by the India-based Committee on a Sane Nuclear Policy.

The latest and most ambitious initiative was the February 1995 meeting in Delhi of the Pakistan India People’s Forum on Peace and Democracy which brought together 100 Pakistanis and 100 Indians linked with mass movements, trade unions, women’s groups, fisherfolk associations, environmental groups and peace and human rights groups. The no-holds-barred discussion on Kashmir, militarisation

and nuclearisation and the politics of intolerance showed that Indians and Pakistanis could sit together and work out a common basis of understanding on even contentious issues. The next meeting is scheduled for Lahore in November.

The Indian bureaucracy makes light of these people-to-people initiatives. The “other voices” in Pakistan are dismissed as “having no impact on Pakistan’s policy,” a senior foreign ministry official said. And “our



Pakistanis protesting human rights violations

takes up in his article, “Contemporary Conflicts”. Professor Hoodbhoy regrets the absence of debate. Support for a debate comes from unexpected quarters. In April, Benazir Bhutto’s media adviser, Farhatullah Babar, in *The Muslim* called for a no-holds-barred debate on the pros and cons of Pakistan going nuclear. He followed this with an appeal in *The News* that “non proliferation should not become nonsense just because the U.S. subscribes to it”. It picked up the line of the visiting U.S. Deputy Secretary of

correspondent(s) in Islamabad” take their cue from that prejudiced mind set. They are not heard.

At the peak of the Babri Masjid crisis in 1992, there were columnists who appealed against Pakistan fanning communal vengeance in India, warning that the same communal wave would end up engulfing Pakistan as well.

Even on as emotional an issue as Kashmir, there are those who have spoken out against the government’s policies, like Dr Mubashir Hassan, an ex-cabinet minister and former PPP chief. In the Problems of Governance series on Pakistan, Akhmal and Mushahid Hussain have expressed concern at the fallout on Pakistan society of the internecine quarrels of the Kashmiri militants based in Pakistan. The battle scars on Pakistan society from the Afghan adventure are an everyday reminder of the costs.

But these voices who look beyond

the politics of confrontation are not heard in India. It is the jingoistic war of words which is heard. There is Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto warning of a third Indo-Pakistan war over Kashmir. A few months back it was Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who combatively asserted that 47 years after partition, the only “unfinished task” in Kashmir was the restoration of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) to India.

The deadlock is all the more absolute because the governments of India and Pakistan no longer know how to talk to each other. SAARC summits used to be opportunities for breaking the ice. The last Dhaka summit became an exercise in how Bhutto and Rao could avoid talking to each other. As for this year’s SAARC summit in Delhi, Benazir Bhutto skipped it.

Which leaves us at the rock bottom of “proximity talks”. Norway did it for PLO and Israel. The U.K. and the U.S. top the list of willing brokers. India takes umbrage at this

third party brokerage. Pakistan invites it. But with the bilateral channels of communication getting choked, the danger is that the agenda for talks will be foisted on them by third parties.

The price that India and Pakistan pay is not merely in terms of their foreign policy options getting reduced to the one liner — are you with us or against us on Kashmir? More damaging in the long run is the fallout of the politics of confrontation on the internal polity, the strengthening of anti-democratic and communal forces in the name of safeguarding national security.

Any move by India and Pakistan to talk has become a hostage to the politics of mistrust fanned by the political elites of India and Pakistan. A people-to-people meeting of citizens of India and Pakistan, discussing common problems of peace and democracy, demonstrates that there is in both countries a constituency of peace, beyond the politics of prejudice. □

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