

South Asia

Saarc

Civil-Military Oligarchs vs. the Masses

By Mansoor Mamoon



WHEN the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) was still in its formative stage the then Foreign Minister of Pakistan Agha Shahi writing under the heading of 'Challenges and opportunities of Regional Cooperation' in January 1984 correctly diagnosed the new stirrings among the mass people of the region by saying, "The people of South Asia are aroused and impatient to be delivered from the degradation and despair of mass poverty which has been their lot for centuries, but which they are no longer prepared to tolerate".

When Saarc was formally launched in December 1985 it, therefore, generated great enthusiasm, rising expectations and bold promises among the peoples of the member-states that burying their bitter pasts at last long they would be able to forge new destinies for them benefiting from a structured cooperative grouping. Till then, South Asia was the only region without any regional cooperation. Close by was the example of ASEAN through which South East Asian countries, once derided as the Balkans of the East, were making steady progress and bold strides towards economic development. But despite all the ingredients and resources of becoming prosperous South Asia continued to languish as the world's most prominent poverty pocket, comparable only with East Africa. Saarc was deemed as a panacea and a formula for pooling the resources and efforts of the mem-

ber states for their collective benefit. Though a late starter the success of Saarc was not negligible. Despite many constraints arising out of inter-state relations it made headway in forging a South Asian identity and evolving strategies for poverty alleviation through cooperation, coordination and integrated approaches. But, as South Asia was moving towards preferential trading arrangement which would have eventually culminated into a compact economic bloc and free trade area fostering flow of investment and commodities among the member states, came the unforeseen blow. Relations between India and Pakistan reached an all time low centring their long lingering dispute over Kashmir resulting in their frenzy of arms race and nuke capabilities.

When General Pervez Musharraf usurped power in Pakistan, the geo-political situation in the subcontinent resembled a simmering cauldron. Consequently, Saarc got stalled. The summit, which was an annual event, could not be held for the last two years as India refused to sit with Pakistan on a regional plank. The smaller countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives were helpless bystanders and could not do much to bring India and Pakistan together and revive Saarc.

Very recently Sri Lanka, bedevilled by its continuing festering Tamil insurgency, made a desperate bid to assuage India to give up its rigid stand and agree to the holding of the long-delayed Saarc summit. It despatched its foreign minister first to New Delhi and then to Kathmandu. The

Indian government told point blank that the timing for the summit was not as yet ripe for what it described as 'lack of consensus' among the member-states. The Sri Lankan foreign minister met his Nepalese counterpart and the two held the view that in view of Indian opposition there could not be any immediate summit meeting of Saarc member-states.

In South Asia, because of its size, population and resources, India has the biggest clout. When Saarc was mooted it was expected that India would follow the example of Indonesia in ASEAN so as to make the forum viable and effective. In fact, the largest member country in ASEAN, would have shown big brotherly attitude cooperation in South East Asia would have faltered and fumbled.

So once again it was proved that the ruling elite whether they be civil-military oligarchs or party political demagogues, are the new Brahmins of South Asia. National resources are at the disposal of their privileges and authority, synonymous with the sanctity of the state. These new Brahmins, the ruling elite are still dominating the free people with the mindset of enslavers though colonialism in the region is long gone and a new era of geo-economic competition based on open markets, free trade, regional cooperative alliances in the form of what has since been known as globalisation has ushered in. When most of the countries are moving towards closer economic integration and mutual cooperation to successfully meet the challenges of globalisation and reap the benefit out of it, South Asia has once again tragically relapsed into isolation from the

new global economic trends.

It is a critical situation for the region and was underpinned by the members of the civil society—lawyers, journalists and social, human rights and NGO activists and other professionals—from five South Asian countries, who gathered together in Kathmandu in connection with the holding of the four-day conference of Second Saarc People's Forum. At the just-concluded moot a speaker rightly observed, "We are passing through a very difficult time. The situation is now worse than in 1947". Yet another speaker said, "Unfortunately, food production in the region is not an economic issue. In fact, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and multinational companies (MNCs) are affecting our food production system. It is time we needed to see power structures, policies and humanitarian issues for the sake of our livelihood. The conference was of the opinion that South Asia is extremely rich in resources. It is the multi-national companies which are looking at the resources and exploiting them. We must unite to stop this process".

This sentiment ricocheted among the participants, who identified political unrest, food crisis, wrong development policies and globalisation as the principal reasons behind the present crises in South Asia. The crises will have snowballing effect unless the ruling elite realise where they are drifting their region to. The sooner they do so the better for their people as well for them too, failing which there might be catastrophic consequences the signs of which are already visible.



SRI Lankan Foreign Minister Laxman Kadirgamar was in Kathmandu just the other day and discussed the possibilities of convening the postponed next summit of SAARC leaders with Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told the representatives of the Overseas Correspondents Association of Bangladesh (OCAAB) recently that certain developments in the region may give the impression that the Saarc has been affected but she believes the process of regional cooperation would continue and its activities are not stalled.

All these bode well for the forum of regional cooperation in South Asia. But contrary to this impression, the fact remains that the Saarc is in a difficult situation, as the next summit of its leaders hangs in the balance. True, members-countries are keen to see that the conference of their leaders takes place without further delay. It is also equally true that various ongoing activities of the forum are continuing. But the reality is that much of the future of the organisation that was founded in Dhaka in 1985 hinges on the summity cycle since it is the heads of government who take the vital decisions to develop the forum. The leaders are scheduled to meet once in a year but the scheduled summit which was to take place in Kathmandu more than a year ago remains uncertain. It is not the first time that the summit has been delayed or postponed. But what is disturbing this time is that never before the event was delayed indefinitely and so much so that a kind of frustration has

gripped those who foresee a bright prospects for this cooperative spirit despite its sluggish progress in the last 15 years of existence. The Saarc has unfortunately been caught in a quagmire and it seems somewhat difficult to come out of the precarious situation. The existence of the organisation has not been jeopardised or for that matter none of the seven members are showing lack of interest in its activities and programmes. This situation notwithstanding, the fact is that uncertainty surrounding the next summit has cast a gloom in the Saarc horizon and this can only be eliminated when the summit is held.

Last month, senior officials of seven member-countries met at Colombo and discussed matters relating to Saarc activities. While inaugurating the meeting, Sri Lankan foreign minister Kadirgamar did not appear pessimistic about the forum's future but he also did not make any bones of the fact that summit is important for the organisation and to his dismay there is little sign to break the stalemate over the event. The standoff continues and this is more worrying for the smaller members of the body.

There is no denying that the current problems on staging the summit stem from rivalry between India and Pakistan. Admittedly, their enmity is nothing new but still Saarc was born and progressed by leaps and bounds given the resource constraints and inherent mistrust that characterises the bilateral ties between several members. Why then the Indo-Pak bilateral relationship now stands on the way to hold the next summit? Their traditional hostilities nosedived in mid last year over Kargil conflict. And a military takeover in Pakistan further compounded

the ties. General Pervez Musharraf came to power in Pakistan whom India considers as the mastermind of the Kargil. Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee is believed to be not willing to meet the Pakistan strongman and as such New Delhi asked for postponement of the event in last October before the summit was to be staged in the Nepalese capital.

Bilateral meetings do take place in the Saarc summit on the sidelines of the main conference. There is also an impression in some quarters that army rule in Pakistan has become a stumbling block to the holding of the event. However, this argument appears somewhat hollow since Saarc leaders in the past did not bother about the system of governance in a member-country considering this as an internal affair of a sovereign nation. The first summit in Dhaka was hosted by Bangladesh president Lt. General H.M. Ershad and was participated by Pakistan military dictator General Ziaul Haq. Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi, Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene and others attended it. The very fact that Pervez Musharraf is in power appears to be the reason for Indian reluctance to the summit at this stage. Does it mean that there would be no summit as long as he remains in power? However, India has not given any official position on this. New Delhi said time is not conducive for the event. Going by Saarc charter, heads of governments meeting takes place when all members are unanimous on it. As the stalemate persists, there is also a silver lining in the otherwise dark cloud. Indo-Pakistan relations, currently at one of the lowest ebbs, may improve in the coming days as some forward movements are discernible involving Kashmir - the main bone of contention of

their dispute although nothing substantial has occurred given the complexity of the problem. New Delhi and Islamabad are not holding bilateral talks at any level for more than a year while such talks were common before despite their differences on many issues.

Many analysts feel that bilateral relations among the member-states are largely responsible for problems in the Saarc witnessed often while the forum is supposed to deal with only multilateral matters, keeping away from the contentious bilateral matters. But reality is that issues between two members do matter. Unfortunately, Saarc has become a victim of bilateral relationship said former foreign secretary and secretary general of the first Saarc summit in Dhaka Faruq Ahmed Chowdhury. He said the seven-nation forum was also expected to contribute to the development of bilateral relations as a logical corollary to the cooperative venture but deplors that it is still dependent on state of bilateral ties. "When the problem is between India and Pakistan and the situation turns serious, it is all the more dangerous," says Chowdhury hoping that SAARC will come across the hurdles.

The ongoing Saarc activities provide hope for the future of the forum even though the standoff continues. The 19th Saarc Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) meeting began in Dhaka on December 19. Strengthening of such activities and integrated programme of actions (IPA) will hopefully help early holding of the summit which will certainly take place. After all, no member-state is against the forum which might not have blossomed into a much viable one but has definitely proved beneficial to vast multitude living in the region.

Security

The Hotbed of Tension?

By Ekram Kabir



"SOUTH Asia is the hotbed of tension," said the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) said on October 19 in its annual report. Military tension and terrorism still dominate South Asian relations, with Pakistan and India frozen in a dangerous diplomatic stand-off. The IISS estimated that 1,000 people had been killed in occupied Kashmir from January 2000 to August 2000. IISS judged India and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities to be "little changed" during the year.

Does this imply anything for the region? It should. Because earlier in April the US State Department for the first time identified South Asia as a major hub of international terrorism, accusing Pakistan, the traditional US ally, and especially Afghanistan of providing a haven and support to international terrorist groups. In its latest annual report describing the administration's efforts to combat terrorism, the State Department also concluded that while Americans were once threatened primarily by terrorism sponsored by states, today they face greater threats from "loose networks" of groups and individuals motivated more by religion or ideology than politics and financed increasingly by drug trafficking, crime and illegal trade.

The locus of terrorism directed against the US continued to shift from the Middle East to South Asia, at least so says the West. The Taliban continued to provide safe haven for international terrorists, particularly Osama Bin Laden and his network, in the portions of Afghanistan they controlled. Reports also continued to indicate official Pakistani support for Kashmiri militant groups, such as the Harakat ul-Mujahidin, that engaged in terrorism. In Sri Lanka the government continued its protracted conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Security problems persisted in India in 1999 from ongoing insurgencies in Kashmir and India's northeast. Kashmiri militant groups continued to attack Indian government,

military, and civilian targets in India-held Kashmir and elsewhere in the country.

Pakistan allegedly is one of only three countries that maintains formal diplomatic relations with - and one of several that supported - Afghanistan's Taliban, which reportedly permitted many known terrorists to reside and operate in its territory. America repeatedly has asked Islamabad to end support to elements that conduct terrorist training in Afghanistan, to interdict travel of militants to and from camps in Afghanistan, to prevent militant groups from acquiring weapons, and to block financial and logistic support to camps in Afghanistan. In addition, the US has urged Islamabad to close certain madrassas, or "religious" schools, that actually serve as conduits for terrorism.

The separatist group in Sri Lanka, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which the US has designated a Foreign Terrorist Organisation, maintained a high level of violence in 1999, conducting numerous attacks on government, police, civilian and military targets.

As the West, and for that matter the US examines terrorism in South Asia, they can't help but recognise that if it weren't for the fact that the Taliban are in power, there would be a different equation going on. It would be whole different situation in South Asia. Other than this terrorist acts are a worldwide issue targeted toward people of all backgrounds by terrorists of all backgrounds. Now why is Afghanistan important? And why is South Asia? There may be three reasons. First, the most immediate are the threats that directly affect the world today. Secondly, the terrorism that emanates out of this part of the world threatens regional stability, for example in Pakistan itself, the Kashmir conflict. And finally, over the longer term as the coordinator for counterterrorism the West is concerned about the caldron of terrorism that's bubbling out of Afghanistan and will continue to threaten American interests in the longer term.

The question arises: why has South Asia become the locus for terrorism around the world? The primary reason that comes to mind is Kashmir. And of course Afghanistan, starting in 1979 with the invasion of the Soviet army. The long and ongoing conflict in Afghanistan attracted fighters from around the world, many of them at US bequest, in the mid-1980s.

Combating and preventing global terrorism is one of the most serious challenges facing America's foreign policy in this new era. Now what the West is going to do about it if they are so keen to combat terrorism that's going on around the world, especially in South Asia. And if they are going to be the facilitators in these issues, do they have an even hand so that they can make sure to continue communicating with all nations? It's important that they have.

There's been a lot of talk about Pakistan, which has been a US ally for 50 years. It helped the US during the problems it had in Afghanistan; it was a conduit for military equipment and weapons going in there to stop the Russians - the then American foe. It worked with America in Somalia; it has worked with the US during the entire cold war. And now whenever the US talks about terrorism involving Pakistan, it seems that there is always a reluctance to talk about the problems right across the border, in India. Isn't it a sad commentary how they have applied somewhat of a double standard towards its relationship with Pakistan? Pakistan has been a friend of the US, thick or thin, but it seems that the US has been kicking this country every time. In fact, America always needed a whipping boy, and it seems that Pakistan is always the one that it does this. It is therefore time for making a very comprehensive statement to that effect. In India there are half a million troops in Kashmir, reportedly gangraping women, going in in the middle of the night, taking people out of the houses, and killing them and torturing them. And people just disappear. It's not understandable as to why the US pays so much attention to Pakistan, who has been with them through thick and thin, and they don't say anything about India, who was an opponent during the entire cold war.

war.

The Taliban support for terrorism, and its harbouring of Osama bin Laden, needs to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. The West is responding to the threat, and Pakistan plays a very critical role to play here. The US must remember that it is not in Pakistan's interest to have the Taliban on its border. It is also not in Pakistan's interest to have terrorist groups operating within its borders. One has to judge whether it is in India's interest to have Pakistan isolated, thereby producing a greater threat to peace and stability in South Asia. While it is undeniable that some terrorist groups operate in Pakistan, Pakistanis themselves are often the victims of terrorism.

However, the US is not surprised with the terror that's coming out of South Asia region. Because it has been a part and parcel to supporting the Taliban when America helped the mujaheddin reject the Soviet occupation in the mid-'80s. Now the West seems to have an obligation to do their part to help establish stability in South Asia, and it is in their interest to do so. The threat of nuclear conflict and terrorism in South Asia is very real. They must help reduce this threat and halt the arms race in South Asia, but unless Kashmir is addressed, no real progress can be made. If the West turns their attention away from the region, as they did after the war in Afghanistan, they risk further erosion, violence and disillusionment. They are uniquely positioned, as a long-standing ally of Pakistan and as an emerging friend of India, to bring the parties together. Given the stakes in South Asia, punitive economic sanctions would be clearly counterproductive. Democracy will be strengthened not by economic sanctions but by economic aid. Funds for cooperative counterterrorism efforts, economic development, civil society building and respect for the rule of law are needed.

But above all else, the South Asian countries themselves must devise a mechanism to combat terrorism that's stemming from the region, only by cooperation among themselves; by discussing the issues with each other. They need to do something about the issue before the West does.

Pakistan

Sawaal Das Karoor Ka

By Amna Khaigsi in Karachi



LAST month, I received an article from one of my friends in Dhaka. The article revolves around the South Asian's tender attitude towards corruption. I must confess that while reading it I was not fully convinced with the author. But today the dramatic departure Nawaz Sharif - the deposed and convicted Prime Minister of Pakistan - proved what Ekram has argued a month earlier.

The deportation of Sharif from Pakistan, though proclaim to be the news of the first year of 2000, is not at all a surprise for many. The echo was in the air since the last week but nobody was taking it seriously. It was hard to believe for the people of Pakistan that the military regime would easily provide the safe passage to the country. All the public calculations, however, went wrong.

Nawaz Sharif is, indeed, a unique example in the political history of Pakistan who has been expelled from the country. Though earlier, president Iskander Mirza was expelled by Field Marshall Ayub Khan, Mirza was not the political personality.

The departure of Sharif, the leader Pakistan Muslim League (PML), one of the leading parties in Pakistan has blown the political structure of the country. People who were wholeheartedly supporting Nawaz Sharif for the sake of safeguarding the democratic norms in the country, are now lost. The rising ARD (Alliance for Restoration of Democracy) movement has faced a severe setback. Even what shaped and reshaped GDA (Grand Democratic Alliance) has also missed the beats. The drawing rooms of politicians are now silent and the political activities that were very much in the air since last couple of weeks are now frozen. Not only this, the break-up of PML into various factions and power battle within

the party due to the leadership crisis has now calmed down. Everybody, till date have stopped their heartbeats and reading the upcoming uncertainties carefully. Today the repugnant statements of politicians are the spices of Pakistani newspaper. But does this mean that the political progress has been expired with the departure of Nawaz Sharif? No, certainly not.

The country is indeed in a confused state. With the exile of Sharif and absence of Benazir Bhutto - the major players of political arena of Pakistan, there is a sudden leadership vacuum in the country. This vacuum, however, can be also used as a golden opportunity for those mid-level politicians who are not able to come up in the main field and overshadowed by the influential personalities of their leaders. Even within the Muslim League (the oldest political party and the founder party of Pakistan) the sincere and senior politicians who are only involved in the unhealthy internal party politics and are not able to endorse an impact in national politics, got a brilliant chance to move ahead and stable their political future.

What requires is a farsighted and mature move by all those who claim themselves as the political treasure of Pakistan. What rightly the Anwar Khalil, a political analyst, said in a programme on Pakistan Television: "Today the sincere politicians have an opportunity to write the political pride of the country and prove themselves that they are mature enough to handle the delicate system of democracy".

Benazir Bhutto, the other political charisma in Pakistan and the chairperson of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) the second leading party in Pakistan, who is in self-exile, must also be cursing her absence from the state. The Sharif departure would not only have given her the space to capture the leadership crown but also provide her the chance to show her political strength in the country. Her absence has indeed put her on the losing side. Some analysts, however, consider that

the pardon of Sharif by the military government may have also risen a hope in the PPP circle about the freedom of Zardari. Zardari, the husband of Benazir Bhutto, is also facing jail sentence for the last several years on various charges. Though the official statement and even Zardari is denying all such rumours, who can deny the possibility? In that context, the rumours have already been spread that during the recent Musharraf visit to UAE the Zardari release was also on the agenda list. Let's see what the more news are obscuring in the upcoming political development.

Both public and political analysts have interestingly questioned the role of army regime, particularly Gen. Musharraf. Though government said that the decision was taken in the interest of country and the people of Pakistan, it does not satisfy neither public nor political experts. "Why Musharraf has compromised?" appeared as the 'sawaal das karoor ka' even after more than 48 hours has been past after the decision.

Two main factors seems to dominate the decision. One, the external pressure that the military government is facing due to suppressing the "democratic forces" in the country which has further hampered the positive attempts taken by the government in national development. Simultaneously the mysterious role of the Saudi Arabia, the trusted friend of Pakistan who played an important role in the whole drama, was also considered to be the key factor. Though the news of Saudi Arabian sympathies for Sharif family is not new but the active participation in releasing Sharif family have clearly shown the close relationship of Sharifs with the Saudi Royals. Hence the government of Pakistan, being stuck up in the financial turmoil cannot afford to risk the Saudi generous support by avoiding his pressure for the Sharif pardon. Indeed, a sensible approach by the so-called autocratic government!

The second factor again, can be termed as an economic compromise. The deceit money that the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) could not able to restore from the financial frauds of Sharif family, have been received as a freedom price, which could support the dying economy of Pakistan in one way or another.

The exile of Sharif and further the rumours of Zardari freedom, one is afraid, may not encourage the corrupt politicians and officials who are facing a bit hard time due to NAB activities, to bargain their secure escape by the ruling regime. Would the prevailing government policy despite earning some coins, would clean up the dirty political games in the country? Would Musharraf with all his slogan of "establishing and strengthening the democratic values" able to provide a clean political ground for his country fellows? These are undoubtedly difficult questions. Only time will tell the gamble that Musharraf has played was right for the country or not.

Kashmir

The Window of Opportunity

By Harun ur Rashid in Canberra



THE recent cease-fire declaration by both India and Pakistan on Kashmir has obviously stirred hopes of reconciliation in the minds of the people of the two countries and almost all newspapers in both sides of the border have splashed the news item.

The initiatives seem to demonstrate that both nations appear to be unanimous in their fear that the situation has been festering on the brink of a horrible abyss and something needs to be done. The 'no-dialogue' attitude of India towards Pakistan's military regime has resulted in an icy state of bilateral relationship and an inherent danger lurks in such a situation.

However the hope for a dialogue between India and Pakistan has appeared to have been diminished by a statement reported on December 18 by Prime Minister Vajpayee that India was ready to resume dialogue with Pakistan but violence, terrorism and killings in Jammu & Kashmir must end. The conditions stipulated by the Indian prime minister appears, in the eyes of Pakistan, to be non-starter.

India's unilateral declaration of cease-fire on the Kashmiri militants during the holy month of Ramadan followed by Pakistan's order on December 2 to its military personnel to exercise "maximum restraint" (in other words "cease-fire") on the line of control (LoC) in Kashmir were encouraging developments. As Winston Churchill said that jaw and jaw was better than war, war.

India's prime minister was reported to have indicated that the cease-fire might be extended beyond Ramadan. This announcement reportedly encouraged Pakistan to accept on December 4 that bilateral talks could begin between the Kashmiri separatists (All Parties

Hurriyat Conference a forum of 20 Muslim separatist organisations in the Indian-administered Kashmir) and India so long that they would lead to a tripartite talks (India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris) immediately after Ramadan to resolve the protracted dispute.

The Hurriyat leaders went to New Delhi for talks with the Indian leaders but at the time writing no contact took place between them. Al Hurriyat was expected that they would urge the Indian authorities to allow a team of their leaders to visit Pakistan for dialogue while another team could hold talks with India.

It appears that Indian reported statement on December 18 indicating its conditions to commence talks with Pakistan does not sit favourably well with its earlier initiatives. India's equivocation on dialogue has naturally raised concerns with the parties.

Political analysts believe that the two issues, namely Palestine and Kashmir, have created an arch of instability in West and South Asia and both Israel and India are partly responsible for the situation. There is a view that India realises that Kashmir issue continues to be a 'magnet' for potential extreme Islamic militants from other countries. The Islamic militants treasure a cause worth fighting for on behalf of "de-enfranchised" Kashmiri Muslims in the Indian administered Kashmir.

The self-assertion by the Kashmiris in the Indian-administered Kashmir since 1989 had led reportedly to about 70,000 deaths. This is not a situation which can easily be calmed down by military action on the part of India. The movement for people's rights has its own momentum because there is a sense of injustice or oppression that envelops the minds of the people. There is a view that extremism breeds out of the sheer frustration and is like a bush fire easily started, spreads quickly and is somewhat indiscriminate about who or what it damages.

It appears that India's cold attitude towards Pakistan is not gaining any support from other countries. The western-dominated IMF has recently sanctioned loan for Pakistan. The neighbours of India within the region and outside have maintained normal relations. Chinese leaders welcomed the military ruler in Beijing. Pakistan plays an important role in the Islamic organisation and its relations with the Islamic countries are strong and stable. On the whole India has not been able to isolate Pakistan on the ground of installing a military regime in the country.

Pakistan's military rulers, at the same time, want to show to the world that they are reasonable, peaceful and seek stability in the subcontinent. From the very beginning Pervez Musharraf wanted to meet Atal Behari Vajpayee and in February of this year he told in an interview on Indian government-owned Doordarshan (TV) that: "We should meet. I would certainly like to meet him (Vajpayee)... We can reduce tension through a discussion cutting hysterics against each other and address issues of major concern".

Both countries are aware that a sizeable part of their national budgets is being spent on defence at the expense of the socio-economic programmes for poverty alleviation. According to a military journal, the defence expenditure of India in 1998 was \$14.1 billion and that of Pakistan \$4 billion, constituting 3.01 per cent and 6.56 per cent of their GDP respectively. India has topped up its defence expenditure by a 28.2 per cent last March.

It appears that Kashmir issue has got more into emotional side of both countries. Both countries are prisoners of their mindset of past history. Unless they free themselves from past attitudes, the talks may not achieve anything.

The followers of Hurriyat Conference based in India are not

happy with the present status of Kashmir. They are not to be satisfied with more autonomy. It appears that they would like to be a part of the political process to decide the status of Kashmir. There is a view that they might press at some point of time to exercise the right of self-determination in Kashmir.

It appears that Pakistan wants a tripartite talks (India, Pakistan and Kashmiris on both sides of substantial concession to the Kashmiris. It appears that the ball is in India's court and its response to dialogue on Kashmir would be crucial in the coming days. If India continues to stonewall the talks, an opportunity will be missed.

The hardline groups of Kashmiris in Pakistan did not see any breakthrough in the present initiatives and said that diplomacy had failed in the past and would again prove fruitless in resolving the dispute. They vowed to press ahead with a new offensive against Indian armed forces during Ramadan. Therefore sporadic violence in the Indian-administered Kashmir may likely to continue (until December 8 the media reported that 30 have been dead since the unilateral declaration).

Often there are puzzling signals from India and Pakistan to each other which cannot be grasped easily and may even surprise many political analysts. The difficulty appears to be that a peace initiative is not considered to be a peace move when that initiative is taken by someone the other party cannot trust. The present overtures can only succeed if one trusts the other and that can only be determined when there is a dialogue between the parties on good faith.

India is a regional power. There is a view that it has a responsibility to de-escalate the existing situation on Kashmir. Many believe that a window of opportunity has arrived and that India may not let it pass by.