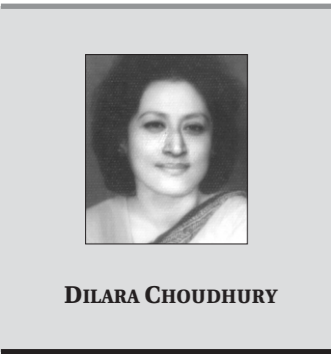


Indo-Pak peace initiative: Rekindling hopes for a troubled region



DILARA CHOUDHURY

ON April 18, 2003, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee suddenly declared from the capital of the State of Jammu and Kashmir that India was ready to resume dialogue with its nuclear armed neighbour Pakistan after nearly eighteen months of standoff, following the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament on December 13, 2003, allegedly sponsored by Pakistan. Vajpayee's peace offer has been euphorically responded by Pakistani Prime Minister Jamali who went to the extent of not only reestablishing the diplomatic and other links but also inviting Vajpayee for a possible summit.

Since then there has been a lot of positive developments and it seems that there is a genuine desire for peace from both sides. A process to create a conducive environment for a three-tiered dialogue, beginning with Deputy Secretary level meeting to a possible summit, is underway. Moreover, US involvement in the resolution of the Indo-Pak conflict also raises the glimmers of hope. Despite all these encouraging scenario -- the question as to whether these two countries would see eye-to-eye continue to be a nagging phenomenon. And the phenomenon arises due to the complexities of Indo-Pak conflict.

First, the Kashmir problem. BJP's stand on the issue has been quite unequivocal that Kashmir is an integral part of India and any negotiation to change Kashmir's status quo would be the acceptance of 'Two Nation' theory and signal for India's potential balkanisation. Only concession Vajpayee can possibly make is to promise full provincial autonomy of the State of Jammu and Kashmir by upholding Article 371 of Indian Constitution and that too if Pakistan-controlled Kashmir (PoK) is also given the same status. For BJP even that would be like going back

on its principled stand on Kashmir (it is to be noted that BJP as main coalition partner of ruling NDA has already soften it stand on Article 371) something that is an anathema to Hindutva.

However, BJP's present stand is nothing new. Since State of Jammu and Kashmir is divided every Indian Prime Minister beginning from Nehru to Vajpayee insisted that Kashmir status quo be accepted by Pakistan thereby declaring LoC as the international border between India and Pakistan. But it was Pakistan's refusal to accept the Kashmir status quo and insistence on the implementation of UN resolution of 1948-49 for the self-determination of Kashmiri people that prevented the resolution of the issue. It was argued that without Kashmir the very foundation of Pakistan would be shaken and Pakistan's security would be seriously compromised. India and Pakistan, thus, remained bogged in the ideological riddle of South Asia. Subsequently, Kashmir insurgency, which was allegedly sponsored by Pakistan through 'cross border infiltration' and its demand to discuss Kashmir first before discussing other issues further complicated the situation. In this context, can Vajpayee offer any concession on Kashmir if Pakistan gives in on "cross-border terrorism" and "freeze" Kashmir so that they (India-Pakistan) can move forward with other issues?

Second, for more than fifty years both India and Pakistan have preached nothing but hatred, mistrust and prejudice about each other. As a result generations have come of age without really getting to know each other. Most are unaware of the commonality of their rich history, culture and heritage. Can the Indo-Pak leadership mobilise the ordinary masses to support the peace negotiation that requires 'give and take' by thwarting the activities of groups like Bajrang, Shiv Sena, Shang Parivar, Lashker-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahideen, and Jaish-e-Muhammed who do not want normalisation between India and Pakistan?

And lastly, memories are still vivid when an irate Vajpayee ordered snapping of all communications as well as deploying troops along LoC, which were promptly matched by Pakistan. Does Vajpayee who refused to have any talks with Pakistan unless it stopped its "cross-border infiltration" and talked about Pakistan

being a fit case for "preemptive" attack following the American invasion of Iraq, really mean business? These are all very poignant points but the fact is he did offer peace talks and we have to look into the factors that motivated him to take such momentous steps and what Pakistan can do on its part to make it a success.

A deeper look into the situation reveals that Indian Prime Minister

say that he is not seeking a place in the sun but he is a seasoned politician and knows that Washington wants a closer relation with India for economic and strategic reasons, which is difficult if Indo-Pak impasse continues, for America also needs Pakistan. Resolution of Indo-Pak conflict indeed is in the interest of Washington and the US, at present, has tremendous influence on Pakistan. He is aware that

gic compulsions as evidenced by recent Presidential waiver to allow the release of \$305 million assistance to Pakistan by the Congress in the fiscal budget of 2003 and Islamabad to purchase some spare parts and military ware despite the sanctions under the Arms Export Act, which forbids economic and military assistance, credits or guarantees, and military education and training and Pakistan-specific

government, has recently adopted an amendment proposal that Pakistan Government be asked to submit a report on "cross-border infiltration" in Kashmir and its weapons of mass destruction by the US President.

Islamabad heaved a sigh of relief since it (the proposed amendment) did not put any restrictions and it was not time-specific and that Islamabad could evade another

peace is superbly timed and is already bearing fruits. According to sources close to ruling PML (Q), Islamabad has already assured US on both counts and "both good will gifts" were delivered to Indian leadership through US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Islamabad has, thereby, retreated to its February 1999 position when Prime Minister Vajpayee and the former Pak Prime Minister Nawaz Shariff signed the Lahore Accord, which fell apart due to the disagreement between then Pakistan Government and the Army. Actually, every civilian Prime Minister of Pakistan beginning from Bhutto to Nawaz (they have been, however, rare and far between) tacitly, i.e. without losing face, wanted to accept the status quo in Kashmir.

Bhutto, for example, during the Simla Agreement, had privately assured Mrs. Gandhi that LoC would be accepted by Islamabad as an international border. In the same token he was prompt to mention about his domestic constraints (Army's stand on Kashmir, which subsequently foiled the Lahore Accord of 1999 through Kargil fiasco, as well as the Agra Summit of 2001). This time around happily not only the Army but ISI is also on board. American involvement in this regard should not be underestimated as demonstrated by the warm reception given to a visiting ISI chief by Bush administration and President Bush's warm remarks about President Pervez Musharraf. Whatever the reasons may be if Pakistan has agreed to abide by its promise to tackle the thorny issues then it is time for India to reciprocate.

I would conclude by stating that at present the peace process in South Asia perhaps has the best possible chance of success than ever before. Although Vajpayee's initial offer of peace was unconditional the pre-conditions have once again resurfaced. But thanks to American pressure and perhaps also the realisation in Pakistani leadership that, in the long run, continued Indo-Pak hostility would hurt Pakistan more than India. Another factor for optimism is the reactions of the Kashmiri people. Kashmiris are weary and tired of continued violence, which has so far cost more than 80,000 lives. As such, the Government of Mufti Muhammad Sayeed and All Parties Hurriyat Conference have welcomed the peace process. The secular forces on both sides are also advocating a better understanding between the two countries.

However, one has to also keep in mind that there will be some obstacles in the way to peace. From Pakistani side two factors may interfere. First, resolution of Kashmir would mean a possible retrenchment in Pakistani military establishment. Would Pakistan need such a huge Army if the chance of war with India becomes remote? India may even sign a 'no war pact' with Pakistan if Kashmir is resolved thereby making Army's present privileged position precarious. Some sections of the Army may not like that.

Second, Pakistan government would have to face the wrath of Islamic extremist forces as discerned by Mustahida Majlish-i-Amal's conditional support to Jamali that Kashmir issue should be at the top of the agenda. They may withdraw their support if that does not happen and exploit the already existing anti-American feeling of the Pakistanis. Third, India's insistence on Pakistan making a declaratory statement about "cross border terrorism" and "freezing" Kashmir may again vitiate the environment and make problems for an already troubled Pakistan government. And lastly, if India takes a very strong stand on Kashmir issue due to its position of strength for domestic consumption then the process may be hampered.

The good news is that despite all these complexities both countries are inching towards creating a conducive environment for a meaningful dialogue. Both countries are, especially India is, moving very cautiously. India following the dictum 'once burnt twice shy' is watching the development carefully and it wants to wait and see the "progress" made by Pakistan under US tutelage. Thus, the process would be complex, long and arduous. Many things may happen in between. But we, the South Asians are hoping that India and Pakistan leadership should not act in a manner creating problems for others so that people and groups opposed to peace moves can torpedo it. It will require the wholehearted commitment of Indo-Pak leadership and a realisation that the entire region would be engulfed in acute instability if the peace process is foiled. It is *really* high time that India and Pakistan buried the hatchet and moved forward to build a prosperous South Asia.

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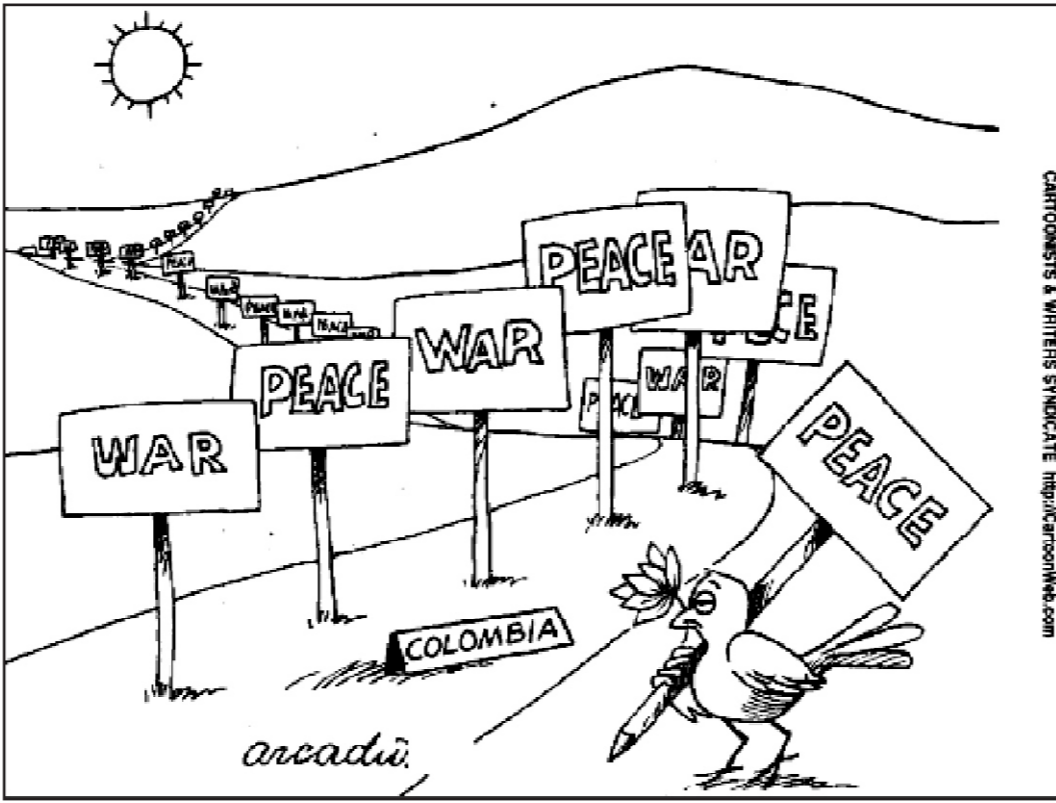
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was not simply motivated by emotion, situations in Iraq and Kashmir and a realisation that countries of South Asia must come together to safeguard their national security in the backdrop of the recent marginalisation of UN but also by *real politick* i.e. deciding to play the American card. This is not to

weakened despite its wholehearted cooperation with the US as its coalition partner in its war against terror.

On the surface Pak-US relationship is warm and friendly due to their respective security and strate-

section 620 E (e) of the Foreign Assistance Act prohibiting sale or transfer of military equipment without a Presidential waiver. But despite these friendly gestures there are issues that deeply affect Pak-US relations and US Congress, in order to keep the Democle's sword hanging over Pakistan



As the axis of evil turns, Christian fundamentalists are at the gate

RON CHEPESIUK

LAST May 4, Benny Elon, Israel's tourism minister and high level envoy, visited the U.S. on a mission to derail George Bush, Jr.'s roadmap for peace in the Middle East. Elon didn't meet with members of Bush's executive cabinet. The envoy really didn't have to. Elon met instead with several Evangelical Christian leaders who have the ear of the president and serve as a kind of shadow cabinet.

For those unfamiliar with the intimate alliances in American politics, it may seem like a strange liaison: a leading Israeli politician on an important diplomatic mission makes it a point to meet with extreme right-wing Christian leaders. But in Republican circles these days, if you can't hook up with Bush or member of his inner circle, a meeting with Pat Robertson or the Reverends Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham or Charles Stanley is the next best move.

In pursuing its tough and uncompromising policy against the Palestinians, Israel, under Ariel Sharon and extreme right wing Likud Party, has no better friends in the world than the millions of Evangelical Christians in the U.S. In their fundamentalist vision of world, the Evangelicals see supporting Israel, right or wrong, as the best way to fulfil -- and even speed up -- the Bible's doomsday plan for the world. Some of Israel's fundamentalist supporters proudly use the somewhat oxymoronic term of "Christian Zionist" to describe themselves, as they zealously help raise millions of dollars and drum up substantial support for pro-Israel causes.

This is fine with George Bush, Jr., who is proud to call himself a "born again Christian" and who knows that the Christian Zionists and the millions of other evangelicals form the bedrock of the Republican Party base. This axis of convenience -- Bush, Israel and Falwell and his crowd -- is already having a significant impact on international affairs, intensifying the prospect of what many hope to avoid -- and others fervently want -- a clash of civilisations. The axis, moreover, may complicate the Bush administration's best laid plans for post war Iraq and the Middle East. The axis makes a lot of sense if you understand its members. Many devout Christians are bothered by how religious faith is seemingly infusing Bush's political views and driving U.S. foreign policy. They're afraid, moreover, that religion is shaping the Bush administration's policies towards Iraq and the Middle East.

Last March, the Christian Century, a leading U.S. religious magazine, said in an editorial. "The American people have a right to know how the president's faith is informing his public policies, not the least his foreign policy regard-

ing Iraq and the Middle East." But Bush remains proud of the religious zeal he has exhibited in the political arena and talks openly about how he was headed toward damnation but was saved from a desolate life dominated by the alcohol bottle. He attends Bible study and encourages his subordinates to do likewise and starts his cabinet meetings with prayer. It's hard to recall a time when one of his speeches did not make a reference to his Christian faith. Indeed, those speeches with their liberal inclusion of Biblical references have revealed the president's world view to be quite simple: good versus evil. You are either with us or against us.

Michael Gerson, a brilliant wordsmith and theology graduate, writes many of Bush's speeches. It was Gerson who coined the memorable "axis of evil." For Bush's

the Jews are part of a divine plan that doesn't really have a happy ending for them. According to the Evangelical script, the founding of Israel in 1948 was the first in a series of Biblically mandated events that will lead to Armageddon and the return of Jesus. Now the evangelicals are waiting for the period of extreme violence and turmoil in which millions die, including many Jews. The survivors -- including the remaining Jews -- see the light and embrace Jesus.

Some Jewish groups have asked: With friends like that, do we really need enemies? "To what extent will a theological view that calls for Armageddon in the Middle East lead (evangelicals) to support policies that may move in that direction, rather than toward stability and peaceful co-existence," Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of Religious

that God has planned for all of us.

So if Bush is sincere about his Middle East Road Map, he does have a serious problem with a powerful part of his constituency as he tries to implement it. A 2000 University of Akron Survey put the number of Evangelical voters in the U.S. at 26 percent of the electorate. Karl Rowe, a key advisor of Bush's 2004 re-election campaign, noted that four million evangelical Christians didn't vote in the 2000 election. Just getting one million of those voters to vote for Bush, Rowe speculates, will be enough for the Bush camp to win re-election.

But judging by the Christian fundamentalists next move in the Arab World (let's not use the more emotive term "crusade" here), making that happen may not be easy as it looks. While the Bush administration deals with the mess in post-war Iraq, Christian funda-

population that has not heard the Gospel of Jesus in their language. Stanley uses the American owned Evangelical Broadcast Network to beam his weekly sermons by satellite TV and short wave radio across the 10/40 window.

But at a time when many Muslims are suspicious of the West and view such Christian missionary activity as being just another Christian crusade, the presence of these foreign religious zealots can only exacerbate tensions and distrust. Islamic website Khilafath.com has described Franklin Graham's plans for post war Iraq as the "fourth Crusade war" and characterised Graham's plans as "enhancing the connection among Arabs and Muslims that the U.S led war of aggression on Iraq is part of a new crusade campaign."

They are also putting many Christians in Muslim countries at risk. For instance, Salon revealed that in recent months there have been attacks on Christians in Lebanon, Yemen, Algeria, the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria and other Muslim countries. Meanwhile, Sheik Adbdelatif Homeim, a leading Muslim cleric has called for the killing of Christians. Given such developments, President Bush has a responsibility to rein in his evangelical friends and allies. Now is not the time to be raising the red flag of Christian fundamentalism in the Muslim world.

Action Centre of Reform Judaism, told U.S. News and World Report magazine last August.

Robert O. Freedman, political science professor at Baltimore Hebrew University, agrees. "Once you get in bed with them (the evangelicals)," he said, "You are to a certain extent, subscribing to their view of what America ought to be. And that, in my view, is not in the best interests of the Jewish people."

But it has been tough for Israel to reject the tremendous amounts of money and other kinds of support that has been forthcoming from Evangelical groups. For instance, some 250,000 evangelicals have donated more than \$60 million towards Jewish immigration and relief support to Israel, while another group said that it raised enough money to help 65,000 Jews immigrate to Israel between 1991 and 2002.

One can't help but wonder what kind of strategy is being planned in the meetings Elon and other Israeli envoys have had and are having with evangelical Christian leaders, who don't really have a stake in seeking peace and justice in Palestine. After all, a Middle East settlement would be contrary to the coming doom that the Bible promises will come. Many Evangelical groups support Israel only because they believe Israel's dominance in the region will hasten the scenario

mentalists with close ties to him are poised and ready to swarm into the war torn country and begin proselytising for Jesus and spreading the word of the Christian gospel.

"The opportunity for broadcast expansion in post-war Iraq is phenomenal," enthused Don Black, Vice President of In Touch Ministries in Atlanta, in an interview with the web site Salon last month (April). "It would be one of our goals to be able to have a platform to tell the truth as we understand it, as any communicator should have the right to do." In Touch, which Bush's good friend evangelist Charles Stanley heads, claims to broadcast to every country in the world. Samaritan's Purse, a relief headed by Franklin Graham, who got in hot water with U.S.-based Muslim groups last year when he described Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion," is another group planning to proselytise the people of Iraq, which, by the way, is 97 percent Muslim. All these groups are doing it under the guise of providing aid to the Iraq people.

Such missionary activity in Muslim countries, of course, is not new.

Evangelicals refer the area in which Middle East and much of the Muslim world is located as the 10/40 window, a 10 by 40 degree area north of the equator containing the majority of the world's

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