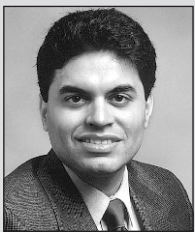


Bigger than the both of them



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

HOSTILITY between India and Pakistan has become one of those facts of geopolitical life one simply accepts, like the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Except in South Asia there has been neither genuine peace nor even a peace process. But things might be changing. India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf met last week and, in Musharraf's words, made history. Yes, it's the beginning of a long road, much could go wrong, both sides remain inflexible on Kashmir. But suspend disbelief for a moment. In substance and style, the two countries have moved further in the past 10 days than the preceding 10 years. This is big news and understanding why it happened yields big lessons.

First, give the leaders their due. Vajpayee and Musharraf have pushed for a rapprochement over the opposition of their bureaucracies. Vajpayee's important peace overture, a speech in Srinagar on April 18, 2003, was read in advance only by his three closest advisers. Musharraf is similarly driving policy with a few aides and over the groans of much of the Pakistani establishment.

Both leaders have evolved. As

To stop a country from encouraging conflict, place high costs on such behaviour. But to truly change, that country must also see a positive future. This is what is lacking in the Middle East...But they must also see a vision of prosperity -- and grasp it as India has. So far, too few Arabs believe they can master this globalised world.

a general Musharraf was a provocateur, planning the infamous military operation at Kargil in 1999. But the general is becoming a leader. Despite his many stops and starts, Musharraf has done more to battle extremism and promote reform than any Pakistani leader in the past quarter century. The recent attempts on his life demonstrate that at the very least the extremists think he's fighting hard against them.

For his part, Vajpayee has consolidated his position, decisively winning a power struggle against his hard-line Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani. As the prime minister approaches his last election and last term (he is 79), he wants to leave a legacy. For Vajpayee, a decent man with honorable instincts, what better accomplishment than a resolution of the 50-year tensions between India and Pakistan?

But the focus on personalities does not tell the whole story. The backdrop to last week's events involves not just two people but two major shifts in the global landscape - the rising costs of terrorism and the benefits of globalisation.

For 15 years now Pakistan has found a cheap and effective way to fight over Kashmir -- by helping Kashmiri militants in their terror tactics. September 11 changed that game. It stigmatised terrorism and gave India a crucial ally on this issue -- the United States of America.

Suddenly Pakistan found that supporting terror had become very costly indeed.

But something equally important has happened in South Asia over the past 15 years. India has been transformed by a market revolution. Globalisation has come to every part of the country, whether in the form of a call-centre job, a Chinese-made toy or American-inspired television shows. Suddenly Indians want to compete. And they are. Last year India's economy was the second fastest growing in the world, at 7.4 per cent. Its business leaders speak confidently of becoming global players in their fields. In this Indian future, a continuing cold war with Pakistan is a drag.

During the same period, however, Pakistan went down a different path, one of radical Islam and domestic dysfunction. The results? In 1985, its per capita GDP was 6.5 per cent higher than India's; today it's 23 per cent lower. Its birth rate is soaring at a frightening 2.8 per cent, while India's is 1.7 per cent and dropping. Thirty percent of Pakistan's economy is consumed by its military.

Musharraf has broken Pakistan's fall. And he realises, now, that to modernise Pakistan he needs peace with India. But the country is proving hard to turn around; the rot has set in deep. And yet, as Shekhar Gupta, one of India's smartest pundits, has noted, peace will be a success only when Pakistan is a success.

Here is the lesson: to stop a country from encouraging conflict, place high costs on such behaviour. But to truly change, that country must also see a positive future. This is what is lacking in the Middle East. Arab countries that fund and foment terror should know

that the costs of doing so have risen. But they must also see a vision of prosperity -- and grasp it as India has. So far, too few Arabs believe they can master this globalised world.

Last week, however, we have had one small, encouraging counter-example. It turns out

that Libya's decision to renounce its nuclear programme was crucially pushed by Gaddafi's son -- trained at the London School of Economics -- who urged his father to help Libya rejoin the world and the world economy. The father could see only the stick. The son also saw the carrot.

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We have a bright future lying ahead!

K M ZUBAIR SADEQUE

A glorifying fact that often gets lost in the midst of constant struggles of maintaining a decent life by a common citizen in Bangladesh is the progress that this country is making in many spheres despite its resource constraints and the natural adversities that it has to face. Percentage of people below the poverty line is coming down, remarkable progress is being made in empowerment of rural women, our democracy is working reasonably well with three successive governments elected through relatively free and fair elections. The list is by no means exhaustive.

What makes these achievements intriguing is the fact that Bangladesh made all these possible with so little resources. A tiny country with a population of half of the US, it is indeed a great achievement when one considers the fact that we do not have an abundant supply of any natural resource (some say that Bangladesh is floating on natural gas, but how far that is true remains to be seen, and in any case, resources lying under the ground are of no value until they are put to any economic use). It is true that a lot remains to be done to ensure a decent life for everyone. In the impoverished country of ours, people still die from hunger (the recent monga in North Bengal is a cruel reminder of the challenges before us). There are still malnourished children without an opportunity to go to schools (the story of Masum as Dr. Saad Andaleeb put in his article in the DS on January 1, 2004 is a harsh reality for many children of our country). Still there are people without proper clothes and shelter to save them from dying in cold (the cold spells that we have are mild in terms of any standard; dying from such mild cold only speaks of the dreadful helplessness of the poor people).

It is an irony that while Dhaka glitters with posh shopping malls and fancy cars (number of BMWs and Mercedes is growing at an amazing rate on Dhaka streets), the far-flung areas of Bangladesh remain crippled with poverty and illiteracy. The last time I visited a remote corner of Bangladesh was in 2002 when I went to the southern island of Bhola. I had the opportunity (or maybe the misfortune) to observe the strained smile in the face of a poor farmer who still struggles to produce a good crop so that his family does not go hungry. We hear about the tremendous progress in rural electrification that is working wonders for the rural people of

Bangladesh, but the poor farmer of Bhola could not afford to get electricity connection although the electricity poles went past his household. When asked as to why he was not getting the connection, the reply that I heard simply shocked me. The poor farmer could not afford to pay the minimum monthly payment of Tk 60 for the electricity bills (for the affluent Bangladeshis -- it is less than a dollar per month)! Such is the harsh facts of lives for many people in the country.

Economists say that we have to attain a GDP growth of at least 8 per cent every year if we are to remove poverty and make real changes in the lives of the poor farmers like that of Bhola. So far, we have not been able to achieve the 6 per cent mark. Experts say that two factors are holding back our true economic potential --

If we had a true visionary leader, we could have done wonders and caught up with Malaysia or outperform India and earn the respect and envy of the rest of the world. Even if that miracle of a visionary leader does not materialise, we are still on the right track for a better future. We should be proud of what we achieved and should not lose our confidence in the system.

corruption and the law and order situation.

It may be true that we do not deserve to be branded the most corrupt nation in the world for three consecutive years. However, we cannot deny the fact that corruption is a growing menace to our national development. Someone living here in US who has just come back from Bangladesh tells me that he has seen the latest 7-series BMW running on Dhaka streets. With the high import duties in Bangladesh, that car would cost more than Taka one crore in Dhaka. There are many people in Bangladesh rich enough to afford such expensive cars. Given the lack of consumer credit facilities in Bangladesh, one can assume that the rich people are paying cash for such cars. One cannot but wonder how much wealth they have, and more importantly, how much income tax they pay every year. If the wealthy people of Bangladesh diligently paid their due share of taxes, then I guess our government did not have to go the donors to finance almost half of its total budget every year. An evil nexus of corrupt tax officials and wealthy businesspeople deprives the national exchequer millions of dollars of tax revenues. Not paying proper amount of taxes is a form of corruption that we often do not pay much attention

to. Saying anything about the other forms of corruption like the bribery of public officials or the bending of laws by the influential people would only be a futile exercise.

As for the law and order situation, if we could somehow stop the political patronage of the toll-seekers, then I guess we could have eradicated such problem long ago. Unfortunately, the toll collection goes unabated with its ever-increasing affinity with political quarters. What is more alarming is that not following the rules seems to have become the norm. One simple example could be our total disregard to the traffic rules on the streets of Dhaka. For the poor rickshaw-puller, it could be due to his ignorance about traffic rules, but many of us who are relatively educated

(and supposed to be enlightened), it is due to our complete disrespect to the rules of law.

Few months back I wrote a letter in the DS on our general tendency of not following the rules. Another reader had a rebuttal that the common people are not to be blamed for such disrespect to the rules. If the people in the upper echelon did not follow the rules, what incentives the common people have in respecting the laws, he argued. It is rather a convincing argument. When the common people observe the influential people getting away with breaking the laws and the upper echelon of the society accumulating wealth through unfair practices and corrupt means, the common people surely do not feel motivated to abide by the laws. The question then arises, who is to make sure that the system enforce laws equally to everybody irrespective of social class or economic power? Maybe a truly dedicated and a passionate leader with a real vision and genuine love for this country could be up for the task. Maybe someone like Dr. Mahathir of Malaysia could do the wonders for us.

What is incomprehensible is that the two major political parties are busy mud-slinging at

each other on such futile arguments as to who had a larger role in our war of independence. For the common masses, particularly to people like me who were born after the war of independence, such arguments are irrelevant and frivolous that only speaks of the immaturity of our current political leaders. We are proud of our independence war and we surely can pay due respect to everybody who played his or her due role in our struggle for freedom. Our national parliament, which is supposed to be the centre-front for debating and resolving issues of national importance, has turned into an ineffective institution with the opposition boycotts and the lack of interest by the government to let opposition play its due role. While this goes on, we the common people keep waiting for a true and dedicated leader to emerge to guide us towards enhanced pace of economic development so that the poor farmer of Bhola can get the illumination in his life.

Despite the current shortcomings of our democratic system however, we have hopes for a brighter future. We have reasons to believe that with every successive general election, political leaders will come to ever-increasing realisation of the true power of the common masses that they can exercise through their voting rights. With every general election that is free and fair, we increase the chances of a better government that would be more responsive to the needs of the common people. With the growing voice of a conscious civil society, we hope to achieve better governance. Maybe over time, we will see democracy practiced in the rank and files of the political parties themselves who will elect their own party leaders based on individual qualities and not based on family connections. With every smooth transition of government, we are in fact progressing one-step closer economic emancipation for all. We only need to continue to nurture our democratic system of government.

If we had a true visionary leader, we could have done wonders and caught up with Malaysia or outperform India and earn the respect and envy of the rest of the world. Even if that miracle of a visionary leader does not materialise, we are still on the right track for a better future. We should be proud of what we achieved and should not lose our confidence in the system. We surely have a bright future lying ahead.

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Giving Dhaka a new character

ERSHAD KHANDKER

THE Dhaka city we want to live in is different from the reality. This is normal because the reality is to live in a crime-infested city where finding justice against injustice is like searching for the lost treasures of king Solomon's city. We are a relatively young nation and with a developing economy. Gleaming skyscrapers, open-air cafes, sprawling parks and weaving meandering tracts of monorail and underground subway are wishing for too much. Dhaka city corporation development budget could not dream of providing such amenities to the citizens.

Dhaka city grinds to a choking halt, as the limited roads are clogged up with the great phalanx of cars, buses, trucks, rickshaws and pedestrians using the same road in a daily show of mindless chaos. Urban planning, as a concept seems to have escaped the successive city council members and the successive governments of Bangladesh. This is not a rhetorical remonstrance. We do need a new character emerging for the city, to enable our beloved Dhaka to put its best foot forward. We need to do the best we can with the resources available.

A township can spring in one particular place for a variety of reasons. The discovery of gold,

sweet water source, high yielding land and much of it available easily.... By people in flight from injustice or famine and discovering new land to populate. As a town grows with trade, other townships spring up. People earn money, go places and educate themselves. In the meantime, the town government can oversee development of public utilities. We see ancient civilizations well planned with thought given to public safety, comfort and security. Therefore, we know that people even in the ancient world had clear notions about their city being well planned for the comfort of the citizens. The concept is nothing new.

Dhaka city dwellers have been given a raw deal. That could be said to be the case. The main defence of the Dhaka city council officials would be to point that, the capital city has serious problem with overpopulation. Exodus of people from the villages was not quite an overnight event. All urban cities or capital cities face migration from the villages, of largely unskilled labourers and poor homeless destitutes coming to the city to try and generate some income. Beijing is famous for becoming overcrowded. However, no city displays such apathy in developing its own character. We have a feel of total chaos in traffic, neon signs and bill boards put up haphazardly mirroring the chaos,

island and road dividers installed and broken up and above all, the spread and wanton nature of crime and the pathetic laxity in preventing such crimes.

A city has a physical layout, an environment and a way of life. An urban centre invariably needs to be planned. There are actual urban planners who do nothing else but plan cities in keeping with the needs of the citizens. The famous French architect and city planner, La Corbusier, planned the city of Chandigarh. Dhaka city as such is not beyond repair. If you look at Gulshan and Dhanmondi you see a good example of city life. However, wanton permits being given to business and schools is marring the residential nature.

Introduce a toll for visit to Motijheel during certain business hours. People who do not have offices in Motijheel would pay this toll. This should be computerized. Cars passing by would be registered in a camera and automatic billing could be done against each owner. A cheap device installed in cars could tell them the total amount as they pass by every time. This payment could be paid at the end of the month at BRTA. Those unwilling to pay the toll would need to take other longer routes. And those paying toll would be given offers of easy facilities at BRTA and they would be given incentives like hassle free services

for their cars. A flyover may divert people who are on the inter-district routes. This would ease congestion.

I believe that a whole new character change can be planned for Dhaka city. The government should underwrite the expense for building new flyovers. The toll collected from the flyovers should be given to the city council. This money could be used to build parks and lakes wherever possible. Old buildings should be condemned with their owners given compensation. I believe that Dhaka city policemen should be given an increase in pay and privileges. The policemen could then be convinced to work efficiently. The policemen would be subject to stricter performance review and city dwellers could lodge complaints against corruption and expect quick and efficient rectification from desk policemen. City council officials may also be given higher pay to stop corruption.

A new apex body within the city council headed by the mayor could supervise all this. And the offices of this body should be attached with the prime minister's secretariat quiet like the offices of the board of investment (BOI). We could be sure that donors would come forward to help. We need a quick rethinking. Let us try and raise awareness and call for change as much as we can.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

At the zebra crossing

If you follow keep to the left
Look right.
If you follow keep to the right
Look left.

Look! Look around before crossing the zebra.
Don't worry for taking a few seconds extra.

Do you think the laws of crossing at the zebra?
Are full of abracadabra?

Are they made at the zodiac sign of Libra?

For calming the maniac road raging over the zebra?

Quick! Quick! Run and run!
Or you may likely to be overrun.

Red Crescent or Red Cross would be of little help.
You know well, self-help is the best help.

Do not dance on the zebra crossing
Do not indulge there in jaywalking.

Do not insist on your right of way.

Outriders of the VIPs would hoot you away.

Do not believe an autocrat, red or elected,
Benevolent, benign or self made,
Who tells you to do all your acts breezily
And tells you to speak the truth at all times freely.

The autocrat or and the killer truck are no kin
But in their ruthlessness they are so akin.
Do not believe them and do not on them reckon
Do not cross the zebra even if they do you beckon.
If you are killed on the zebra, they will ridicule
And call you as the poor boor, the peasant fool.
Which is worse, to be smitten by a cobra
Or to be killed by being overrun on the zebra?

If you follow keep to the left
Look right.

If you follow keep to the right
Look left.

Look! Look around before crossing the zebra
Don't worry for taking a few seconds extra.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government



A partial view of Dhaka city: The feel of congestion and chaos.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN