

Pakistan & India: Freedom from past

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Pakistan and India need to go beyond formal exchanges to resolve their differences. The world abounds in examples that the two countries can follow to foster peace and prosperity in South Asia

Only a few weeks ago, Pakistan and India exchanged the lists of their nuclear installations. The purpose of the exercise is that these installations will not be attacked by the two countries in the event of any conflict. But exchanging lists is not a sufficient cover for an unwarranted action by either country. Only a relationship that is based on trust and willingness to resolve all issues and is backed by economic and commercial links as well as strong support from the international community can guarantee that Pakistan and India don't go to war against each other.

Can we, therefore, now start thinking of a forward looking strategy which does not stop at the mere exchange of nuclear installations and thus ensure that the threat of any nuclear or conventional attack is extinguished for ever? The fact that other countries have successfully done that only serves to highlight the inadequacy of the current approach India and Pakistan are employing to resolve their differences.

Even if we confine resolving the problem of nuclearisation of India and Pakistan, a successful model to emulate exists in the form of the Argentine-Brazilian nuclear rapprochement.

During the colonial era, two European powers (Spain in Argentina and Portugal in Brazil) expanded their own rivalry through territorial conquests in South America. Even after their independence (Argentina in 1816 and Brazil in 1822), the rivalry between the independent states continued to reflect their colonial past. Competition for the leadership of South America — with elements of antagonism, rivalry, and mistrust — was always present in the bilateral relationships between Argentina and Brazil.

Though the South American experience can be valuable for India and Pakistan, one important difference must be kept in mind. While Argentine and Brazil were competitors and rivals for the leadership of South America, they were not enemies. The only war between them took place in 1825, more than a century-and-a-half ago, giving birth to a new (buffer) state, the Uruguay, through the peace treaty of 1828. Since then, their relations have alternated between cooperation and competition, but not a single shot has ever been fired. Even a bitter border dispute between them was resolved by arbitration, not war. In 1985, the time came when it was decided to put an end once and for all to the rivalry and mistrust that had pervaded bilateral relations for too long, especially by focusing on social and economic relations.

Beginning with the 1980s, Argentina and Brazil initiated efforts towards a nuclear rapprochement and by 1985 this process developed in earnest. The period from 1985 to date can be divided into two stages: During the first period, (1985-1988) purely bilateral approach to the issue was undertaken while the second period between 1989 and the present had dual objectives: first, to give a legally-binding character to the agreements already signed by the two countries, and second, to take these

obligations to the international field, making the two nations part of the regional and global non-proliferation regimes.

It is in this endeavor that these two countries along with Paraguay and Uruguay formed the South American Common Market (the MERCUSOR) in 1991 which was later joined by Chile in 1996 and Bolivia in 1997. The aim of the formation of the common market was to enhance trade and investment opportunities because these Latin American countries had realised that closer and deeper economic relations facilitated by free trade would further strengthen understanding, faith, confidence and mutual cooperation among themselves.

But if we want to go beyond the nuclear sphere and bring in all the various aspects of bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan, the world is not devoid of lessons that can be easily learnt. There are several examples offered in the history where belligerent neighbouring countries have moved from hatred, antagonism, rivalry and mistrust to understanding, trust, faith and cooperation thereby enhancing peace and prosperity between themselves and in the region.

It took several decades after the World War II to mend relations between the people of Germany and those of France. The formation of the European Union, giving rise to higher levels of economic well being resulting from enhanced economic cooperation, has been instrumental in reducing the enmities — not only between France and Germany but across the Western Europe — and receding the memories of the atrocities of the World War II from the minds of most people, especially of the next generation which came of age by the 1970s. Given that bitter memories of the Nazi atrocities remained vivid among people in Europe even many decades after the World War II, especially among those living in Poland, Holland and Russia, this should be deemed no minor achievement.

Given the high level of economic and other cooperation among different member countries of Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) , it is hard to believe that Thailand was on the American side in the Vietnam war, that Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1975, that Vietnam and China fought in 1979 and that Thailand had a border skirmish with Laos as recently as 1988. Regional co-operation has come a long way since then.

There are several lessons that can be derived from the friendship, cooperation and peace-making process across the globe. First and foremost, to be successful, an exercise of this kind must be based on a sincere purpose of reaching agreements to end nuclear race and/or cross border terrorism and establish a climate of mutual confidence. No moves in this field can have the slightest chance of success if they are taken with the ulterior motive of destabilising the other party or lulling it into a false sense of security. As a first step, a country should open itself to the other party, on the understanding that this policy will be reciprocated. Information should flow fully and freely from one country to the other. Of course, the climate of mutual trust thus attained will not last if flanking and additional measures do not follow to give it a permanent character.

Such additional measures include to keep talking: it's never over until it's over. Secondly, constructive engagement works better than pressure: Renewed efforts for willingness to support bilateral confidence-building measures would lead to more progress than diplomacy-based political criticism accusing each other for cross-border terrorism (which of course needs strong action by both the sides).

Thirdly, regional cooperation infrastructure projects have a potential for the improvement of the well being of all parties involved. The East-West Economic Corridor, a 1500 Km long highway project crossing 6 GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region) countries in the Southeastern Asia connecting South China Sea to Indian Ocean and the Middle East regional cooperation projects are some good examples in this regard. In the same vein the mega-economic projects like the Turkmenistan-

Afghanistan-Pakistan and the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline projects would help in promoting trust and regional economic cooperation between India and Pakistan.

Lastly, it may be beneficial to look for opportunities where the United States (and European Union) foreign policy can support bilateral initiatives that can have positive proliferation. For example, river diplomacy in Argentina accelerated bilateral cooperation in the nuclear area. The current initiative to expand upon 'bus diplomacy' in India and Pakistan should receive strong US and EU support. Similarly, India and Pakistan can benefit if the US offers them Qualifying Industrial Zones (like the ones in which exports from Jordan and Egypt containing inputs from Israel enter duty-free into the US market) under the Generalized System of Preferences of international trade.

Skeptics would argue that in the case of India and Pakistan, the Kashmir dispute is sui generis and thus the improvement of relations is dependent upon its resolution. In this case, one can draw lessons from North Ireland, which has been a bone of contention between the United Kingdom and Ireland as well as a huge number of people living in Northern Ireland. The Irish Republican Army has agreed to lay down its arms, and has also stopped any terrorist activity either in Ireland or in the UK, after thirty years of conflict. Can the same not be attempted in Kashmir, which has become a similarly intractable problem between India and Pakistan as well among the people living in various parts of Jammu and Kashmir.

Fortunately, due to various internal as well as external reasons, a window of opportunity is opening wide for improving relations between India and Pakistan. Both the Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh (apparently due to their own reasons) have suggested ways forward to craft peace among the two nuclear countries. Similarly, people in both the countries and in Kashmir have a strong yearning for peace. They are dreaming of a South Asia free of hunger, poverty and under-development. Like past 59 years, they have been wishing for a new year during which their governments would shift the huge resources being spent on defence expenditures to developmental expenditures. On New Year's eve, which incidentally was the Eid-eve in India and Pakistan too, many expressed their desire to celebrate festival across the border on various private TV channels. Should we not imagine a South Asia full of peace and harmony? Should we not let peace work for prosperity? Should cross border tourism not take over cross border terrorism? There seem to be a little ray of hope from the top. It is about time that we create the pressure from the bottom and facilitate the peace process between two nuclear nations through enhanced economic relations.

Some political observers are defining a new South Asia as a region where various types of freedoms can be realised — that is, freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live with dignity. This is premised on the axiom that every single individual on earth has both the potential and the right to live a decent life. Let us work for a new South Asia in 2007 and grab any opportunity for a long lasting peace following the examples in South America, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

P.S.

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