

Did the Modi government jump the gun in responding to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's invitation for the foreign ministers to meet, without the promise to stop support to terror, as Gen. Pervez Musharraf had done at the 2004 Islamabad Saarc summit to PM Atal Behari Vajpayee? The war of words that has ensued in the aftermath of India calling off the 'meet' can only deepen the acrimony between the two nuclear powers that have already gone to war, four times in 70 years.

How not to conduct foreign policy!



Manish Tewari

The NDA/BJP Government after 52 months of flip-flops, U-turns, somersaults, black-flips and front rolls once again announced that the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan will meet on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in the ensuing week, only to cancel the talks 24 hours later. The jury is still out whether this is a back flip or a front roll. India's Pakistan policy over the past four and a half years is a textbook case of how not to conduct foreign policy.

Nothing would have come out of the meeting in any case except for an anodyne photo-op and another round of mutual recriminations if not a full-fledged bout of verbal Kabaddi between the two Foreign Ministers aimed at their respective domestic audiences.

What is surprising though is that the Ministry of External Affairs chose to make the announcement on a day when a Border Action Team (BAT) of the Pakistani army killed a BSF Jawan Narendra Kumar in the most depraved manner. It was followed up the next day with the killing of three policemen in Kashmir post their abduction. It is obvious that there is some external pressure at work to try and legitimise the new government in Pakistan under the stewardship of Imran Khan.

The new PTL-led coalition government consists of time-worn and skilled actors in the form and shape of Shah Mehmood Qureshi as the new Foreign Minister, who is imprinted onto the combined psyche of the Indian people as the face of Pakistan, ensconced on Indian soil just as the bloodiest terrorist carnage — 26/11 was being executed by Pakistan-based and supported semi-state actors in Mumbai. The assault left 166 people dead and over 600 wounded. It also has in its ranks Dr Shireen Mazari, known for her hawkish views and writings on nuclear and other issues qua India. The new Defence Minister of Pakistan is Pervez Khattak. As the former Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa he was known for his "moderate" views on the Taliban and publicly called for a dialogue with the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (PTT). Not the most inspiring cast of characters from the Indian perspective.

Like any new government in Pakistan, the coalition government led by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) made the ritualistic overture of improving relations with India. On August 26, 2018, Imran Khan tweeted, "To move forward Pakistan and India must dialogue and resolve their conflicts incl Kashmir: The best way to alleviate poverty and uplift the people of the subcontinent is to resolve our differences through dialogue and start trading."

Referring to the Indian leadership in a press conference, he declared, "If they take one step towards us, we will take two, but at least we need a start." He, however, quickly added the Kashmir caveat by stating, "Kashmiris are suffering for long. We have to solve Kashmir issue by sitting across the table. If India's leadership is willing, then the both of us can solve this issue through dialogue. It will be good for the subcontinent also." He further stated "I am one of those Pakistanis that wants good relations with India, if we want to have a poverty-free subcontinent then we must have good relations and trade ties... This blame game that whatever goes wrong in Pakistan's Balochistan is because of India and vice versa brings us back to square one."

Echoing the long held, multi-partisan establishment view in India, a former Foreign Secretary commented, "Khan is equating long-standing Pakistani support for terrorism against India with Pakistan's concocted narrative about India's activities in



Balochistan. His effort to evade responsibility on terrorism and making the issue reciprocal needs proper understanding: Pakistan wants parity with India even on culpability for terrorism."

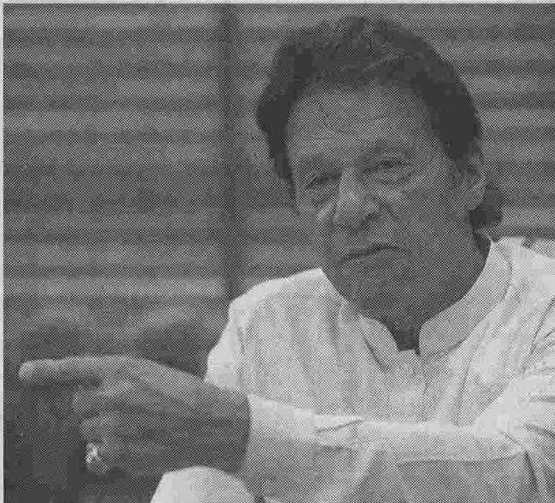
Does not sound a very optimistic start even by our mutually sanctimonious first month platitudinal standards? Haven't we gone through the same cycle, repeatedly, in the past seventy years and especially so after Zia-ul-Haq deposed and then executed Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the late seventies? The starting point of any future tryst should be to first ask ourselves with all the candour that we can muster some fundamental questions — Why does the dialogue pipe cease get shipwrecked repeatedly on the rocky shoals of the Indo-Pak zero sum paradigm? The answer is simple — both India and Pakistan drink from the poisoned chalice of a corrosive and toxic narrative between the two countries. Unless that does not change, nothing will succeed.

What is the story of India and Pakistan? A bloodstained Partition that left 5,00,000 people dead and 15 million uprooted on both sides of the Radcliffe line. For those who survived those traumatic times it was not *Batwara* (the Hindi term for Partition) but *Ujara* (the Punjabi term for devastation). Independence for India and Pakistan also translated into rape, loot, plunder, destitution and trauma for the majority of its people especially in Punjab and Bengal, the two states that bore the brunt of Radcliffe's calligraphy.

It is also the fable of four wars — 1947 over Kashmir, 1965 again over Kashmir, 1971 over East Pakistan now Bangladesh and finally Kargil in 1999 again over Kashmir. It is the tale of cross-border terrorism into India, sponsored by Pakistan's deep state using semi-state actors. From the Pakistani perspective, it is alleged Indian interference in Balochistan and encirclement of Pakistan, through an enhanced presence in Afghanistan.

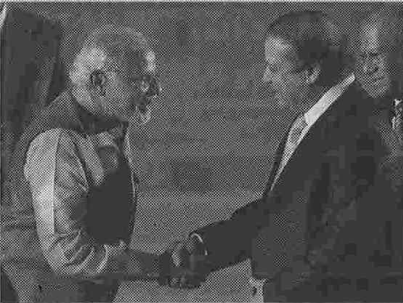
Do you see even a shred of positivity in this parable between two nuclear-armed neighbours where the missile flying time is barely minutes? A sub-continent whose most enduring policy pre-occupation in the words of Shireen Mazari should be "If India seeks to opt for an even-spread amongst its nuclear triad of forces, then Pakistan needs to have an edge on land-based developments in terms of numbers." How then can you even think of making peace in such a situation?

There is a silver lining on this otherwise very dark cloud. The starting point has to be the creation of a new narrative between the two countries. A narrative that can shed the bitterness of the past seventy years, and focus on mutually shared syncretism stretching back into millennia. For seventy years is not even an innocuous footnote in history. Before 1947 never did the Indus River Water Basin and the Ganga River Water system lie in two different Westphalian entities. There was cultural contiguity between the Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb and the syncretic impulses



THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT HAD STARTED WELL WHEN IT TOOK THE HELM. HOWEVER, IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS INDO-PAK TIES HAVE GONE FROM BAD TO WORSE.

TIMELINE



2014 | IN A FIRST, NARENDRA MODI HAD INVITED PAKISTAN PREMIER NAWAZ SHARIF AND THE HEADS OF SAARC MEMBER-NATIONS FOR HIS SWEARING-IN CEREMONY.

2015 | MODI MET SHARIF IN UFA. HOWEVER, IT WAS NOT THE COMPOSITE OR RESUMED DIALOGUE THAT WAS RESTARTED AS BOTH SIDES ONLY DECIDED TO DISCUSS TERROR AND VIOLENCE, DELINK TALKS AND TERROR AND TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE FOR TALKS

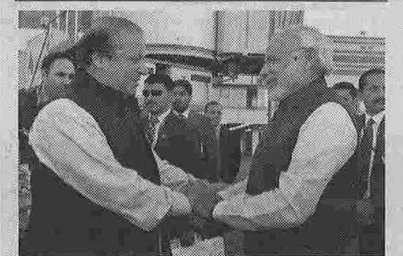
JULY 23, 2015 | INDIA SENT A LETTER TO PAKISTAN INVITING THEIR NSA SARTAJ AZIZ FOR TALKS ON AUG. 23.

JULY 24, 2015: INDIA SENT LETTER TO PAKISTAN ASKING THEM FOR DATES FOR THE MEETINGS OF DGMOs, AND DG BSF AND PAKISTAN RANGERS. PAKISTAN DID NOT REPLY FOR DGMO TALKS, AND THE DATE FOR DG BSF AND PAKISTAN RANGERS TALKS WAS FIXED.

AUG. 14, 2015 : PAKISTAN RESPONDED TO THE LETTER, SENDING AGENDA FOR TALKS.

AUG. 21, 2015 | INDIA DECLARED 'UNILATERAL IMPOSITION OF NEW CONDITIONS AND DISTORTION OF THE AGREED AGENDA CANNOT BE THE BASIS FOR GOING FORWARD' WITH THE NSA-LEVEL TALKS WITH PAKISTAN BUT STOPPED SHORT OF CALLING OFF THE DIALOGUE.

AUG. 22, 2015 | EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER CLARIFIED THERE CAN BE NO TALKS INVOLVING HURRIYAT, AND KASHMIR CANNOT BE ON AGENDA AS IT IS AGAINST THE SPIRIT OF UFA.



DECEMBER 25, 2015 | MODI ARRIVED IN LAHORE FOR A MEETING WITH SHARIF IN A SURPRISE VISIT TO PAKISTAN — A FIRST VISIT TO PAKISTAN BY AN INDIAN PREMIER IN MORE THAN 10 YEARS.



2016: ON JANUARY 2, A HEAVILY ARMED GROUP ATTACKED THE PATHANKOT AIR FORCE STATION, WHICH LED TO FURTHER BREAKDOWN OF THE INDO-PAK TIES.

of the Indus civilisation in terms of the transmigration of shared culinary, musical, artistic and even marital experiences. The continuing fusion between these two regions created a unique shared identity that got disrupted by Partition in 1947. The challenge therefore is to rekindle the essence and spirit of this shared past without disturbing the Westphalian status quo.

That is where Civil Society in both countries must kick in. What we require is not an Aman Ki Asha that was trashed into Aman Ki Ashes by hysterical and profane Television anchors on both sides but an echo system that can emphasize the centuries-old undulating interaction between the Ganga and

the Indus. A template that does not see a contradiction between 'Bhartiyata and Pakistanyat' but a continuing co-existence.

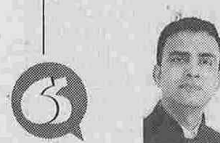
If such an enabling narrative is created by sane, sensible, progressive and forward-looking people and organisations, on both sides, it would allow politicians and policy makers to try and resolve, in an enabling rather than a contentious environment, the entire basket of seemingly intractable issues that are subsumed under the overarching rubric called the Composite Dialogue Process between the two countries, — albeit renamed many times thereafter.

The Indo-Pakistan gridlock holds the destiny of two billion people to ransom in South Asia. It remains

the least connected region in the world with some of the world's most deplorable human development indices.

If the potential of this region has to be unlocked, borders across South Asia have to be made irrelevant. A new dynamic stretching all the way from the borders of Myanmar with Thailand to the Afghan-Iranian border has to be created. It is doable only if the India-Pakistan poisoned chalice is detoxed.

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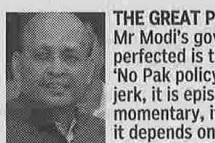
— Ravish Kumar, external affairs ministry spokesperson

THE LATEST brutal killings of our security personnel by Pakistan-based entities and the recent release of a series of 20 postage stamps by Pakistan glorifying a terrorist and terrorism confirm that Pakistan will not mend its ways



— Mehbooba Mufti, former J&K chief minister setting the agenda

CALLING off meeting between India & Pak's FMs is bad news for J&K. Both countries owe it to people of state and country to carry on dialogue rather than talking through media. In spite of a historic mandate, it is media and not NDA leadership that is



— Abhishek Manu Singhvi, Congress leader

THE GREAT POLICY which Mr Modi's government has perfected is the policy of 'No Pak policy'. It is knee-jerk, it is episodic, it is momentary, it is transient, it depends on the mood of the moment