

INDO - PAKISTAN RELATIONS: THE BENAZIR BHUTTO PHASE*

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A major area of concern for India's Foreign Policy formulator's has been the charting of the course of its relations with Pakistan. Over the years, the critical components of India-Pakistan relations have been a subject of serious, searching and sustained debate. With the re-establishment of a democratically elected government in Pakistan in November, 1988, the relations between the two nations have assumed added significance. Hopes have been raised in several quarters that this event would verily be the harbinger of a dynamic, refreshing and welcome phase in India - Pakistan relations.

An auspicious beginning appears to have been made by the two nations, with the signing of three agreements at Islamabad in December, 1988. Though the issues covered under the agreements-prohibition of attack on each others nuclear installations, cultural exchanges and avoidance of double taxation on income from International Air Transportation - were negotiated much earlier, (during the Presidency of late Gen. Zia) their significance cannot be underscored. The Pakistan Prime Minister Ms. Benazir Bhutto referred to the agreement as the step in the right direction. Commenting on her talks with the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, she said that India and Pakistan were "very concerned about making the border more safe and secure for the countries".¹ The Pakistani press too highlighted the importance of the agreement. A leading daily *THE NATION* commented that the agreement had brought about, "regeneration of optimism, where none existed before, a willingness to understand each other's problems (a) desire for bilateral peace".² Mr. Rajiv Gandhi also perceived a new mood on both sides to normalise the relations. Complementing the party in power in Pakistan, he added that the "Pakistan People's Party's policies will be much better than the earlier policies, especially in the more difficult areas."³ The discussions held at Islamabad between the leaders of the two nations set the pace for discussions between the representatives of the two countries at different levels.

However, a realistic note of caution was also struck when it was emphasised that the progress towards normalisation should not undertaken at an unduly hasty pace. Mr. Shabebzada Yakub Khan, the Pakistani Foreign Minister remarked that things are going well but "it would be harmful if we went too fast".⁴

In the context of these developments, the factors and forces involved in the dynamics of India - Pakistan relations merit greater attention. This paper does not attempt to analyse the entire gambit of India-Pakistan relations, but examines a few vital issues.

A view strongly held in certain quarters in that tension between India and Pakistan gets aggravated as a result of the dissimilarity of their political systems and institutions. India believed that durable peace between the two nations could only be consolidated when a democratically elected government was in power in Pakistan. Democratic systems are believed to be more peace loving and keen to avoid conflict situations, while military regimes espouse the cause of war. Further, it is argued that the democratic systems are more intune with the aims and aspirations of its people while a dictatorship runs roughshod over popular sentiments. The niceties of popular consent have no place in dictatorial systems. As a former President of Pakistan, from the ranks of the military states:

What they (young activists for democracy) do not understand was that civil action was subjected to the limitations of the law and had to take into account the currents and cross-currents of public opinion.⁵

It is in this context, that the restoration of democracy in Pakistan is said to have created the necessary congenial environment for the improvement of relations between the two nations. However, it needs to be emphasised that while non-democratic systems may appear to heighten conflicts, a democratic regime alone, is no guarantee, for the creation of the necessary environment for peace. There are several other factors and variables which also play a critical role.⁶

Over the years, Pakistan has witnessed an instability

in the working of its political institutions. In the past, democratic systems have frequently been replaced by military dictatorships. The threat to the survival of democracy in Pakistan is clearly evinced in the comments made by a Pakistani columnist that:

the people in Pakistan are haunted by the spectre of the overthrow of civilian rule.⁷

The incapacity of the civilian administration, in the past, has inevitably triggered off increasing interference of the army in civilian affairs. As a result, the army has become an important power centre in Pakistani politics. The Army officers have:

A sort of gaiety that comes from a confidence in their ability to have things their own way The army seems permanently to run the edge of government.⁸

Besides, to retain their power-base the army in Pakistan, has been a strong advocate of a posture of bellicosity towards India.⁹

Thus, the return to democracy under Ms. Bhutto has to be viewed in the backdrop of Pakistan's history of a fragile democratic process still in its infancy and increasing recourse to military rule. Soon after coming to power Ms. Bhutto complimented the army for its role in the restoration of democracy in the following words:

The army has played an extremely valuable role in the transfer of democracy and I think this should be understood and appreciated This augurs well for Pakistan.¹⁰

In an interview to the BBC, she emphasised that the army could have easily taken over the reins of government, as many politicians had gone to them (the army) with a request to take over power. It was the patriotism of the Commander-in-Chief Gen. Mirza Aslam Baig, that made elections possible.¹¹ These statements reflect an effort undertaken by Ms. Bhutto to appease the military and possibly win it over.

After becoming Prime Minister, Ms. Bhutto realised that she had to consolidate and expand her power base, gradually, to demonstrate her independence. While undertaking this task she had to bare in mind that none of the power centres get unduly perturbed.

An issue of vital concern, in this context context - Ms. Bhutto's ability to translate into reality her projec-

tions on India - Pakistan relations - is the level of success she has achieved in asserting her power, position and role. Has the transfer of power been more formal than real. Mr. Ghouse Baksh Bizenjo, the Chairman of the Pakistan National Party felt that:

The Pakistan Prime Minister, Ms. Bhutto's subservience to the Armed Forces have belied the hopes of the restoration of democracy in the country. This is not the kind of democracy we had struggled for.¹²

A Pakistani columnist, Janm Saqui opines that the transfer of power to civilian hands in Pakistan has only been partial. The vested interests continue to exercise power.¹³

Further, Ms. Bhutto has not been able to consolidate her political support within the nation. Punjab - one of the major provinces of Pakistan - is in the hands of the opposition alliance. Political analysts discern the emergence of a triangular power structure in Pakistan.¹⁴ It is believed that these three dimensions of Pakistan's internal power relationship is likely to remain unchanged in the near future. The three of the triangle are: (1) The 'establishment' - a term used for the military, senior bureaucrats and the elite, (2) Ms. Bhutto and her Pakistan Peoples Party, (3) the Opposition alliance - the IDA - which controls the provincial government in Punjab. However, this analysis ignores a very vital component of the power structure - the clergy.

In view of the compulsions of Pakistan's domestic politics, the capacity of Ms. Bhutto to chart an independent course, change and decide on options needs to be examined. Ms. Bhutto has herself admitted:

Individuals do not operate in total control but against a subjective background and there was always restraints in every society. They are always suspicious.¹⁵

The formulation of Ms. Bhutto's approach to India - Pakistan relations will inevitably be dictated by the compulsions of the domestic situation. Will her attempt to consolidate her power base and strengthen her position within the country, alter the course she has embarked upon? The views expressed in the editorial comments of an Indian daily succinctly states the point:

....it is not as though elected leaders can always be depended upon to resist the temptation to exploit difficulties with neighbours to strengthen their position when they feel vulnerable at home.¹⁶

For Ms. Bhutto, stepping up the process of normalisation of relations with India, at an unduly hasty pace, may also draw increasing flak within the nation. This dimension is also a severe constraint for Ms. Bhutto. She has already been dubbed as being soft on India.¹⁷ Such a charge would critically endanger her position in Pakistan and jeopardise her attempts to consolidate her power. Even during the election campaign, her opponents warned the electorate that her victory would signal a sell-out to India. Ms. Bhutto hit back by emphasising that it was her father who spoke of waging a thousand year war with India. Thus, while formulating her India policy, Ms. Bhutto is compelled to adhere to these domestic compulsions.

Ms. Bhutto's independence in the realm of foreign affairs is also severely limited by the influence exercised by the United States. Her retaining of late Gen. Zia's foreign minister, Shahebzada Yakub Khan is a pointer in this direction.¹⁸

While examining the domestic constraints faced by Ms. Bhutto, in formulating her policy towards India, the views expressed by the Chief Minister of Punjab and the leading figure in the opposition IDA, Mr. Nawaz Sharif gains relevance. Speaking about the positive steps towards normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan, Mr. Sharif squarely puts the onus on India. He observed that Pakistan should be made to feel confident that India harbours no intention to dominate Pakistan - ideologically, politically or culturally. It was upto the Indian leaders to absolve themselves of the charges relating to their hegemonic ambitions. Elaborating, he said:

... I believe that Pakistan's relations with any other country should be based on terms that - are in Pakistan's interest. The most important thing is that relations should be based on the notion of equality.¹⁹

Thus, as a former Indian envoy to Pakistan summarised, the pace of normalisation of India-Pakistan relations should be best left to Pakistan, given its domestic constraints.²⁰

A study of India-Pakistan relations must bear in mind certain basic misperceptions of images about each other, prevalent in both nations.²¹ As a result of the inter-play of a variety of factors, the two nations have become prisoners, caught in the web of these misconceptions.

Pakistan has a deep sense of insecurity and a burning desire to equal India in every aspect. These notions have been triggered off by a string of correlated circumstances. These are examined below. Pakistan has suffered from an identity crisis from the time of its creation. As a Pakistani scholar suggests:

....the main cultural impact of the partition was that India retained a far greater sense of continuity with its past while official ideology in Pakistan, hence the entire cultural enterprise of the state there, was based on an explicit commitment to the eradication of the past the whole society was to be ripped up, torn apart, recomposed.²²

The impetus for the creation of Pakistan was the need felt for a separate homeland for the Muslims.²³ Pakistan's claim to Kashmir is linked to this factor. Gen. Zia's emphasis on 'Islamisation', was linked to the need to provide for a common national identity. An important challenge that Ms. Bhutto faces, is the manner in which she deals with this sensitive issue. She believes that Islam should be a religion and not a form of government.²⁴

The small nation syndrome has also greatly oppressed the minds of the Pakistani leadership. Pakistani writers have often dealt at length on the theory that bigger nations are invariably inclined towards intervention in smaller states. As Gen. Akram wrote, "it is always the bigger powers which are dynamic, forceful and aggressive".²⁵ Pakistan has also hinted that India exerts a sustained pressure on Pakistan to ensure that it adopts a policy that is conducive to Indian interests.²⁶

The two nations also have a strong "cultural affinity". As a result they are exposed to cultural influences from each other. A comment made in this connection, two decades ago is still relevant:

Pakistan's fear of absorption - by India is probably the main cause for disharmony. It is, I believe, this fear which led to the suggestion that Pakistan needs India as an enemy.²⁷

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine certain recent developments in Pakistan and their likely impact on the course of India - Pakistan relations. The internal compulsions that shape this relationship must be borne in mind. India's approach would have to be one of 'cautious optimism'.

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