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ICWA Guest Column

India and Pakistan; chasing hope

by



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For a brief while, and unusually, it was quiet. Terrorists seemed to have withdrawn, infiltration reports were down and the spokespersons were having restful days. Even the media gladiators had nothing to shout about any longer. The buzz was of a different kind; of secret meetings and surprises. For a moment people mistook these as the signs of a new dawn; the beginning of a restful age? And the leadership seemed committed to make it happen.

Then the attack on the Airbase in Pathankot happened. And the surreal in the relationship surfaced again. People began to question the need for talks. It was no longer the argument that 'If no talks, then what?' The demand now became, 'Why must we have talks? What have we ever gained from them?'

But EAM Mrs Sushma Swaraj had informed the Parliament on 16 December 2015; "War is not an option,"

There is also a difference in the manner of pursuit of peace. Some of the crucial talks are being conducted in purdah. And neither side is feeding the media with jaundiced leaks so far. In fact, India has exercised extreme restraint in its statements despite the terror attack on Pathankot airbase followed by that on the Indian consulate in Mazar-e- Sharif in Afghanistan.

By and large media too has been in support of continuing with the talks. And given a choice people in both the countries are likely to vote for peace. The outside world too has noted this with some relief because every time tensions increase between the two nuclear armed neighbours it breathes anxiously.

There is a general recognition that the two must not remain locked in a state of hostility; that it is risky to negotiate from a razor's edge. But what if the two sides falter again? The terror attack in Pathankot was bad enough, but what if Pakistan stonewalls the Indian demand for satisfactory and time bound action against the master-minds in Pakistan? Or if another major terror attack takes place?

Would it then be back to where we were, and India would once again be looking for options? In that event there are the examples of others who have reacted differently in face of provocation and bitter dispute.

After the terror attack in Paris, French President Hollande declared, "We are in a war against terrorism." The French strikes against ISIS targets picked up in intensity soon thereafter.

President Putin of Russia vowed revenge when a Russian fighter jet was shot down by Turkey in November 2015. Russia followed it up with a series of measures against Turkey.

US has almost always chased and eliminated those who, in its judgment, have threatened or harmed its interests and its nationals.

In fact this muscular response has been in tune with the western policy from ancient times. Cicero had warned once; "The day the Roman Empire fails to defend one of its nationals that day would mark the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire." The Western world has largely followed that dictum.

For that matter so too has Pakistan and the Arab world. Pakistan made the US go through the grinder for the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in a US air strike in 2011. Further west, in Gulf, Saudi Arabia's war with Yemen is all about imposing its will. And it was quick to break off diplomatic relations with Iran when its embassy in Tehran was attacked.

Yet, India has been stoic in face of repeated provocation. And it has followed a uniquely different path to respond to terrorism generated from Pakistan. This, despite the fact that there is hardly any other example in modern history where a smaller country has followed consistently the policy of bleeding the larger neighbour by a thousand cuts.

From denying India the courtesy of transit rights to refusing to call it a 'most favoured nation' is the least of the provocations. Pakistani establishment and its proxies have attacked Indian economic

interests and its nationals wherever they could and by whatever means they could over the last three decades. The loss for India has been immense in both the human and material terms.

On the rare occasion where it has stirred itself to threaten action, its eventual response has bordered on the farcical, as during Operation Parakram.

It chose then to hesitate at the brink and contemplate the border for 10 long months before giving up altogether the thought of punitive action. That single act was an admission by India of its utter helplessness; that it had no answer to Pakistan's proxy war. And in further proof thereof it exhausted itself after 26/11 issuing threats of no-talks that Pakistan simply waited out. Therefore it didn't surprise many when Mrs Swaraj declared that 'war is not an option.'

But what are Pakistan's motivations in pursuing talks? First, talking to India means that it is no longer the 'global bad boy,' the tag that has stuck to it since 26/11. Second, this acceptance and the beginning of a dialogue give it the possibility to pursue all over again the Kashmir issue and that of the withdrawal of Indian forces from Siachen. Ironically this delinking of terror from talks by India has given Pakistan a double advantage; a good character certificate from India, and having got that the possibility to pursue its terror agenda earnestly all over again.

Mrs Sushma Swaraj had also said on 16 December, "We have decided that through talks we will resolve the issue of terrorism as talks are the way forward so that the shadow of terror is removed."

That may be so, but there is also the burden of history that advises otherwise. It cautions that Pakistan's acts since 1947 offer a bleak record; its promises have rarely ever been kept in the past. To cite an example from recent history, there is the popular perception that the period after 2004 was one of calm because Musharraf had promised that Pakistani soil would not be used to sponsor terror attacks against India. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. The period between 2004 and 2008 saw some of the most damaging terror attacks ever against India. This, despite Musharraf's promise of good behaviour.

Terror however is only one dimension of this deeply complex, emotion charged relationship. Sometimes people wonder whether India has in its policy repertoire a large enough menu to respond to these complexities.
