

BJP's Challenge to Pakistan

In an early gesture as Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee underlined the importance he attaches to India's relations with Pakistan: he turned up at the India-Pakistan hockey match, greeted the players, and watched the game just long enough - eight minutes - to see his team score a goal. That's quintessential Vajpayee. He likes to be friendly and gracious, and loves to win.

He leads a shaky coalition of 19 parties and an obese team of 42 ministers to which he anticipates additions. A cat with nineteen tails may not survive very long. If it does, it will not run efficiently. Mr. Vajpayee has been wise and bold, nevertheless, in assigning jobs. For the finance portfolio, he bypassed Murli Manohar Joshi, a ranking BJP leader and economic nationalist favoured by the RRS, for Yashwant Singh, a relative newcomer to the party and economic liberal, a clear signal of moderation to capitalists both domestic and foreign.

As Home Minister, BJP president L.K. Advani has the responsibility of keeping order which is quite a challenge for one given to disturbances of peace. The irrepressible Mr. George Fernandes leads the Defence Ministry. He is likely to make media-waves and follow the brass the best he can. The Prime Minister has kept the foreign affairs portfolio to himself, which is an indication of his interest and also of the importance he attaches to India's foreign relations.

If Vajpayee's government lasts even half its legal tenure, its domestic impact is likely to be ideological while he accords substantive attention to India's foreign relations. At a conference in Sri Lanka last week several Indian scholars, including Ashish Nandy who is among India's most original thinkers, emphasised BJP's evolution toward moderation and secularism, and also its dependence on allies whose agendas can only dilute its own. They were convincing up to a point, insofar as hard policies are concerned, BJP's government is likely at best to yield continuity rather than change. "They shall make symbolic changes, agrees Ashish Nandy.

The impact can be harmful nevertheless. Symbolic gestures and events invariably make substantive differences in the lives of nations and peoples. Often the effects of concrete events and policies are more easily reversed by antidotal policies than are symbolic influences. Symbols shape culture, outlook, attitudes and identities. Pakistanis who have lived through the hollow opportunism of Z.A. Bhutto's populist posturing and Mohammed Ziaul Haq's 'Islamisation' process will recognise the truth of this observation. The one was as serious about the people's interests as the other was about Islam. Each, in his own way, was a 'moderate', given to opportunity rather than principle. Yet, the legacies of their symbolic engagements continue to distort Pakistani political and cultural life.

As a party, the BJP runs the dual jeopardy of carrying both the populist and the sectarian germs. Unable to deliver an effective and purposeful government, it is likely to compensate for its failures with symbolic gestures towards its rhetorical promise of 'one nation and one culture.' As Rabindranath Tagore had feared seven decades ago, symbolic gesticulations of this sort can have devastating effects upon the multi-caste, multi-cultural and multi-religious country.

A sense of anxiety prevails among India's neighbours, especially in Pakistan. Their concern has been augmented by BJP leaders' statements that they might induct nuclear weapons in its military arsenal. There are ambiguities in those statements; there is no certainty as to what they actually intend. India's neighbours - none of whom wish to live in shadow of India's nuclear bomb - should nevertheless take this threat seriously and

make, as vigorously and quietly as possible, what effort they can to dissuade Delhi from so dangerous a course. There are greater risks in it for Pakistan than for other countries, as it alone has unresolved disputes with India. Moreover, Pakistan's security environment will be affected by the activation of the Prithvi and Agni missile programmes, an inevitable consequence of inducting nuclear weapons, and it alone will have to weigh its nuclear options.

The need to build pressure on India against the induction of nuclear weapons is urgent. But if it is to be effective it ought to be quiet and systematic. Recent statements of Pakistani officials once again underline our officials' proclivity to disregard the relationship between sound and effect, and ignore the distinctions between diplomacy and propaganda, polemic and politics. To the great powers we need to convey a sense of concern and resolve which are best conveyed by quiet diplomacy and tactical silence. Bluster and threats suggest panic and pugnacity. A momentous issue is then reduced to a South Asian squabble.

Without underestimating its importance to Pakistan's security, we ought to understand also that Pakistan is not the target of BJP's quest for nuclear power. In fact BJP's leaders are among the few in India who are genuinely content over the creation of Pakistan. Authentic communalists, they are happy to be rid of no less than 250 million Muslims, now divided between Pakistan and Bangladesh. In retrospect India's partition was an RSS dream come true, and they would not want to undo it. As for India's quest for hegemony, it is well known that hegemony is not achieved by possessing the nuclear or any other bomb. BJP leaders wish to declare their nuclear weapons because they view it as a passport to the 'great power club', and they are obsessed with formally entering the club. Dangerously silly but true!

The BJP has long been committed to inducting nuclear weapons in India's arsenal, and may actually do so. There are few domestic constraints. In India, as in Pakistan, public opinion does not oppose nuclear weapons. Differences exist within the establishment only on the degree of ambiguity concerning its possession, differences which governments have easy ways of resolving. Moreover, BJP's is likely to remain a shaky coalition, hence unlikely to deliver desperately needed bread and butter to the people. Governments which do not deliver seek refuge in patriotic fervour. Hence the need to neutralise the BJP's inner compulsions with external stimuli. This is better achieved by quiet diplomacy than public warnings and confrontations.

Over the years, Mr. Vajpayee has taken interest in Pakistan. He believes that normal and stable relations with it are essential for India to become a successful player in international politics. "The great powers exploit our differences," he said to me many years ago. As India's Foreign Minister, his enthusiastic efforts to improve relations had surprised Pakistani officials. He is likely again to make vigorous gestures to improve trade and cultural exchanges.

Yet, he is not likely to negotiate Kashmir on Pakistani or even Kashmiri terms. His government cannot repeal Article 370 of the Indian Constitution even if it wants to. But it can harden its military posture in Kashmir, and escalate the ongoing covert warfare with Pakistan. Given the current composition of our establishment, Pakistan's response may be symmetrical. Indo-Pakistan relations shall become then highly susceptible to miscalculations. In Islamabad, as in Delhi, it is time to let analysis prevail over instinct.

Pakistan should weigh its alternatives in case India does weaponise. A number of questions arise; among them the following. What strategic or political benefits accrue from renouncing Pakistan's posture of ambiguity? Security being the objective, why will open - as against understood / assumed - possession of nuclear weapons enhance its security? Will the pressure of great power on Pakistan be comparable to their pressure

on India? Are we willing to bear those pressures? What kind of arms race shall become inevitable as a result of two-way weaponisation? Is Pakistan in a position to enter such an arms race against India? What, if any, are the strategic, political, and economic advantages in continuing to keep a posture of ambiguity? There is a taboo of sorts on this subject. Officials could do citizens the favour of initiating the needed discussion.

There is a crying need also to review our Kashmir policy. Ground realities have changed in the valley. I have argued this case repeatedly and at length in this space. Quotations from General Sunderjee and citations of Indian human rights violations cannot change those realities. If the national interest is to be served, they ought to be confronted. But nothing is more central right now to Pakistan's security than peace in Afghanistan and improvement in relations with Iran. They are neighbours with long borders with Pakistan and share with us the affinities of culture, history and faith. Since Pakistan's founding, Iran had been a loyal friend and a source of security because our interests were complementary. Harmony is our geopolitical imperative. In recent years, our policy or the perception of policy, particularly as it concerns Afghanistan, has soured relations between us. It must be restored to its natural, collaborative state. There is no place more central to starting this process than Afghanistan.

Not long ago our officials used to claim kudos for bleeding the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The Soviets departed. The Americans left also having cashed in their investments. A decade later, Afghanistan's Mujahideen are continuing to make mince meat of the country and its hapless people. Our officials deny responsibility with impressive ingenuity and zero effect.

Two facts about this ugly civil war are incontrovertible: Pakistan is the dominant power in relation to Afghanistan, the strongest, most retrograde, and anti-Shi'a warring faction enjoys its support. Iran, along with Uzbekistan and Russia, is aiding the Taliban's fractious opponents. Thus external factors have become organically linked to Afghanistan's warrior culture, and its economy of drugs, guns, and smuggling. If peace is a goal, those links must be broken. There is no point in apportioning guilt. The problem and opportunities can be identified.

Afghanistan has lost its centre. The people that were known in traditional Muslim societies as ahl al-hall wal aqd have vanished from it. There are no peacemakers left in Afghanistan. That possibility lies outside of it. That responsibility rests with Pakistan and Iran, with the United Nations serving as a facilitator. Only when a peace process starts in earnest can one persuade the United States, European powers, and Japan to provide the incentives of a meaningful aid package for Afghanistan's reconstruction. Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, a highly respected Algerian diplomat, arrives in Islamabad today seeking peace for Afghanistan in the United Nations' behalf. The time to begin the high game of peace is now. May one hope that Prime Minister Vajpayee will have the pleasure of watching Pakistan score this time?

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