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Need for UN's role in Indo-Pak impasse

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The world watches India and Pakistan from afar. We applaud steps toward reconciliation and we fear the times of crisis. In the 21st century, war between these two great countries should be unimaginable yet responsible leaders cannot ignore the unresolved issues, especially Kashmir.

Given the well-known history between India and Pakistan, would it be beneficial to augment the negotiating process with a formal plan that will encourage compromise? There follows a proposal that both Indian and Pakistani leaders are asked to weigh. Either side could call on the UN to adopt the following policy: If private negotiations remain stalled between India and Pakistan, the UN will encourage public negotiations. This plan, requiring full approval by the Security Council, would result in the development of a new international communication process by the UN.

The central instrument of this process would be a short series of perhaps twelve to sixteen-page magazine-size "challenge documents" widely distributed within India and Pakistan and also to many world capitals via a handful of national and international newspapers and/or magazines. Simultaneous publication of these documents would take place on an authorized web site.

Terms for such public negotiations might call for each side's initial challenge document to include its interpretation of history, moral arguments, core interests and negotiating positions. If both agree in advance, each side's initial challenge document would be distributed simultaneously. (More later on how this process would unfold without an agreement.)

Then, alternating every two weeks, each side would proceed with its own challenge document, responding in the prescribed format. Essentially, the UN would design the form of this new media, while both India and Pakistan would present the substance of their case before the world public within their own challenge document.

Should a foreign idea, especially one coming from America, be considered by the people of India and Pakistan? It is affirmed that this proposal is solely that of the author who has no involvement with the US government. Proposing that the UN plays a role in the creation of this communication structure runs entirely against current US policy, which seeks to ignore or marginalize all international institutions that are not directly controlled by the US. Moreover, technological advances has made the resolution of the dispute between India and Pakistan a world issue.

With these public talks, the majority of citizens on each side will see more clearly than ever the stark and difficult compromises necessary for an agreement. This will provide political cover for leaders, who can then show their constituencies the complex and detailed tradeoffs necessary to reach a settlement. In contrast, leaders emerging from secret negotiations are vulnerable to extremists who can portray one or two simple issues as a towering betrayal by the leaders who negotiated that deal.

What of India's insistence on only direct bilateral negotiations with Pakistan and no involvement of a third party? This is a direct bilateral process. Moreover, it is not proposed nor anticipated that the UN would be an arbiter or mediator for these public negotiations. To the contrary, the UN's proposed role would simply be to create a neutral communication structure.

As a practical matter, if President Musharraf called on the UN to create this large-scale conflict resolution strategy, would it not be difficult for anyone to object to another form of dialogue and engagement between India and Pakistan?

Although extremists on both sides will adamantly oppose this process, the majority within each of these nations will see this as an alternative to the violence of the extremists. The negotiating tradeoffs will be difficult for both sides to accept but each society will better understand the logic and rationale of their leaders - and the other side's leaders - which in turn will tend to marginalize the extremists.

What if one side initially refuses to participate? The other side could proceed with its challenge documents absent any agreement. A key motive to engage in this process would be to favorably influence regional and world opinion. The motive

for an adversary to respond in kind would not be some vague notion of goodwill, but rather, to head off erosion of public support. Refusal to take part in this public peace process would also risk worldwide acceptance of an adversary's interpretation of history.

Will people in the subcontinent and beyond be interested in these documents? This direct and unfiltered source of news will constitute a new media that will stand in sharp contrast to the many reports on conflicts we have experienced for years. This process will generate a wide range of media coverage including TV, newspapers, magazines, radio and the Internet. People everywhere, recognizing the life and death nature of these dramatic communiqués, may find this multifaceted perspective of enormous interest.

Encouraging both sides to make their cases in this defined format may tempt some to manipulate their version of events. Nevertheless, this direct and equal clash of opinions, in sharp contrast to propaganda, has the potential to yield a greater public recognition of truth than is otherwise possible in today's media environment.

If this public negotiating process culminates in a single document signed by leaders in both India and Pakistan and then distributed worldwide, confidence would increase that agreed-upon terms would be adhered to. Similarly, confidence would increase that terms of an agreement would not be reinterpreted in sharply divergent ways after the fact. Personal trust between individual leaders would also become less important because commitments would be spelled out for all sides to witness. Indeed, a peace process that is less dependent on personal trust between leaders would contrast sharply with all forms of traditional negotiations including the peace conference.

Knowing that the eyes of the world will be focused directly on the central details of this conflict will weigh heavily on all sides. This precise phenomenon may exert much more pressure for the two sides to compromise when compared with conventional secret talks. Therein lies the central objection to this entire strategy - outside pressure. Yet isn't the alternative stalemate and the continuation of a dangerous confrontation between two nuclear-armed powers?

Envision the world reaction to a new series of narratives unlike any we have ever seen. Every couple of weeks, prior to each new challenge document, leaders from within India and Pakistan and also around the world would be urging that side to take incremental steps towards the position of the other. Once a momentum for peace is created by this deliberate, step-by-step process, it could become unstoppable. Thus, will Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf call on the UN to encourage public negotiations if private negotiations stall?

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