

A vital task for peace in 2006

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THE PEACE process between India and Pakistan cannot possibly be called irreversible, as some of our leaders want us to believe, while the nuclear threat the old rivals pose to each other remains intact. From this perspective one of the most important statements that were made in 2005 came at the fag end of the year from IAEA chief Mohammad ElBaradei.

In an interview to CNN after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Mr ElBaradei had expressed serious concern about the nuclear threat that came from three seemingly intractable issues that continue to worry the world - the Palestine question in the Middle East, North Korea and Kashmir.

That Mr ElBaradei's remarks highlighting the threat from the nuclear hotspots went largely unnoticed speaks volumes of the cavalier attitude many of us tend to betray towards an ever looming calamity.

And if Kashmir is a nuclear flashpoint as a person of Mr ElBaradei's eminence no less suggests it is then the year 2006 has to see to it that the threat is weeded out with utmost priority. The proposed visit to South Asia by US President George W. Bush can go either way in this regard. It can legitimize India's and Pakistan's nuclear arsenal by giving them Congressional approval, while leaving the Kashmir issue simmering. Or it can leave India and Pakistan with the key task of resolving their bloody dispute with the kind of seriousness that has so far eluded them, more worryingly as nuclear states.

Opening up new routes along the Line of Control plus a few other confidence-building measures in Punjab and Rajasthan-Sindh areas have marked a tectonic shift in India-Pakistan bilateral relations no doubt. In 2002 these measures would have looked unthinkable. But seen together with the frequent negative comments that keep interrupting these signs of hope, such as the jingoistic remarks that came from the Bharatiya Janata Party on Kashmir last week, there are serious reasons to worry for the future.

The medieval sultans of Delhi used to be addressed as a Zill-i-Ilahi, or shadow of God on earth. President Bush may consider himself the latter day avatar of the Delhi sultan with a global mission. But he needs to heed the warnings from history if he wants his mission to Delhi to be successful.

A 10-year old article by George C. Herring, Professor of History at the University of Kentucky, deals with the problems faced in the Middle East and South Asia by the Kennedy administration. There are vignette's from history that could serve as lessons for President Bush and for our policy-makers too.

“In both the Middle East and South Asia, the Kennedy administration launched bold initiatives to shift the world’s balance of power in favour of the United States. In each case, the initiative ran afoul of regional rivalries. In South Asia, John F. Kennedy’s efforts to cultivate goodwill with India merely antagonized the United States’ longstanding ally, Pakistan, without tearing India away from its neutralist cold war stance.

“In the Middle East, the administration’s efforts to befriend Gamal Abdel Nasser’s United Arab Republic (the short-lived marriage between Egypt and Syria) resulted in only limited, short-term success while alienating the United States’ traditional ally, Israel, and the more conservative Arab states such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

“The United States enjoyed the most success where it attempted the least, with neutral Afghanistan. Fearing that a 1961 border dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan might force the latter into the arms of the Soviet Union, the Kennedy administration dispatched diplomat Livingston Merchant to encourage a peaceful settlement. Merchant failed, and tensions between the two northern-tier nations persisted, but the result was not what the United States had feared.

“As Pakistan leaned toward Communist China in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian war of 1962, Afghanistan eased away from Moscow. A visit to the United States in September 1963 by the Afghan king and queen seemed to confirm Afghanistan’s neutralism and establish it as one of the prime showcases of East-West ‘competitive coexistence’.

“In contrast, the Kennedy policy toward the more complex and intractable rivalry between India and Pakistan was a notable failure. Kennedy and his advisers agreed that the Eisenhower administration had erred in condemning Indian neutralism and tying US fortunes in the region exclusively to India’s bitter enemy Pakistan. The administration attached special importance to India, the world’s largest democracy, and set out to cultivate its goodwill. The president initiated a warm, personal correspondence with Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, dispatched Vice President Lyndon Johnson to New Delhi on a personal goodwill mission, and initiated a large economic aid programme to support India’s industrial development.

“Washington’s tilt toward New Delhi was already well along when a border war between India and China in October 1962 provided what seemed a splendid opportunity to tighten the relationship. The United States immediately sent military aid to beleaguered India. To mollify an increasingly concerned Pakistan, the administration sought to use the leverage provided by aid to India to work out a settlement of the bitter dispute between the two nations over Kashmir.

“US policy failed on all counts. Under pressure from the United States, India and Pakistan did agree to talks on Kashmir, but the gap between the two could not be bridged and the talks broke down without tangible results.

“Deeply alarmed at the US tilt toward India, Pakistan moved noticeably toward Peking. It concluded a provisional border demarcation agreement with China in December 1962 and arranged a series of much-publicized state visits between the two nations’ top leaders. Still enticed by the idea of luring India into close ties with the United States, Kennedy in his last months in office toyed with the possibility of a vastly expanded military aid programme. The administration eventually bowed to budgetary pressures and Pakistani protests, however, and approved a programme of only \$50 million per year. Annoyed at Washington’s lack of support, India turned increasingly to the Soviet Union for aid. US policies thus broke down in the face of intractable regional tensions, alienating Pakistan while failing to gain the United States significant influence with India.”

The China factor is again being touted by President Bush’s advisers as a reason to engage more closely with South Asia. Unlike Kennedy’s \$50 million military aid to India they seem even willing to commit the disaster of changing the definitions of non-proliferation to indulge India and Pakistan. President Bush perhaps needs to have a word with Mr ElBaradei before coming here in late February or early March.

P.S.

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